

JACK KETCHUM

*"The Girl Next Door is alive. It does not just promise terror,
but actually delivers it."* —STEPHEN KING



THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

From the Winner of the Bram Stoker Award and Author of *She Hates* and *The Lost*

The girl next door by Jack Ketchum

NEXT DOOR WHERE PAIN LIVES.

WHERE THERE ARE NO LIMITS TO THE DARKEST IMAGINATION

“THE GIRL NEXT DOOR is alive... in a way most works of popular fiction never attain; it does not just promise terror but actually delivers it. But it’s a page-turner, all right; no doubt about that.”

-from the Introduction by Stephen King

“Realism is what makes this novel so terrifying the monsters in THE GIRL NEXT DOOR are human, and all the more horrifying for it...Ketchum’s writing has the power that’s missing from 90% of the books on the market today. He never plays it safe, never goes for the cop-out; what you expect to happen, doesn’t... psychological horror at its finest.”

-Mike Baker, Afraid

JACK KETCHUM

Introduction by Stephen King

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To my brother Jon. I love you. I miss you. Boy do I. Your bro, Dave

[] [] Introduction to The Girl Next Door [] []

tied to a beam while a madwoman burns away her clitoris with a laundry-iron.

I have written briefly about Ketchum before, saying that he's become a cult figure among genre readers and a kind of hero to those of us who write tales of terror and suspense. That's as true now as it was when I wrote it. He is, in a real sense, the closest thing we have to an American Clive Barker... although that's more a matter of sensibility than it is of story, as Ketchum rarely, if ever, deals with the supernatural. That hardly matters, though. What does is that no writer who has read him can help being influenced by him, and no general reader who runs across his work can easily forget him. He has become an archetype. That has been true ever since his first novel, *Off Season* (a kind of literary *Night of the*

Living Dead), and it is certainly true of *The Girl Next Door*, which is probably the definitive Ketchum work.

The writer he most resembles, as far as I'm concerned, is Jim Thompson, the mythic hardboiled novelist of the late forties and fifties. Like Thompson, Ketchum's entire oeuvre has been issued in paperback (in his native country at least; he's been published in hardcover once or twice in England), he has never come within hailing distance of the best seller list—he is never reviewed outside of genre publications such as *Cemetery* her

Dance and Fangoria (where he is only rarely understood), he is almost completely unknown to the general reading public. Yet, as with Thompson, he's an extremely interesting writer, ferocious and sometimes brilliant, possessed of great talent and a black, despairing vision. His work lives in a way that the work of most of his better-known literary colleagues cannot even approach—I am thinking of such disparate novelists as William Kennedy, E.L. Doctorow, and Norman Mailer. In fact, of American novelists working today, the only one I am absolutely sure is writing better and more important stories than Jack Ketchum is Cormac McCarthy. This is heavy praise to lay upon an obscure writer of paperback originals, but it's not hype. Like it or not (and many who read the novel which follows won't like it), it's the truth. Jack Ketchum is the real goods.

And, you might remember, Cormac McCarthy himself was an obscure, chronically broke writer until he published *All the Pretty Horses*, a cowboy romance not very similar to his previous books.

Unlike McCarthy, Ketchum has little interest in dense, lyrical language. He writes a flat American line,

as Jim Thompson did, with a rill of jagged, half hysterical humor to brighten it—I think of Eddie, the crazy kid from *The Girl Next Door*, walking down the street “stripped to the waist with a big live black snake stuck between his teeth.” Yet what really informs Ketchum's work isn't humor but horror—like Jim

Thompson before him (see *The Grifters* or *The Killer*

Inside Me for instance, two books Jack Ketchum almost

could have written), he is fascinated by the existential horror of life, of a world where a girl can be relentlessly tortured not by one psychotic woman but by a

whole neighborhood; a world where even the hero is too late, too weak, and too divided against himself to make much difference.

The Girl Next Door is short—only 232 pages long—but it is still a work of considerable scope and ambition. This doesn't surprise me much, in a way; other than poetry, the suspense novel has been the most fruitful form of artistic expression in America's post Vietnam years (they have not been good years for us, artistically speaking; for the most part we baby-boomers have gotten on as badly with our art as we have with our political and sexual lives). It's probably always easier to make good art when fewer people are watching critically, and that has been the case with the American suspense novel since Frank Norris's *McTeague*, another novel Jack Ketchum could have written (although the Ketchum version would probably have left out a lot of the tiresome talk and been considerably shorter... right around 232 pages, let's say).

The Girl Next Door (the phrase itself summoning up images of dopey, good-natured romance, walks in the twilight, dances at the school gym) begins as a kind of fifties archetype. It is narrated by a young boy, for one thing, as such tales almost always are (think of *Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, my own novella *The Body*), and opens (after a chapter which is really a prologue) in a marvelously Huck Finny way: a barefoot boy with cheeks of tan is sprawled across a river-rock in the summer sunlight, catching crawdads in a tin can. Here he is joined by Meg, pretty, ponytailed, fourteen, and, of course, New in Town. She and her younger sister, Susan, are staying with Ruth, a single mom raising three boys.

One of these boys is young David's best friend (of course), and the bunch of them spend the evenings crashed out in front of the TV in Ruth Chandler's living room, watching sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* and westerns like *Cheyenne*. Ketchum evokes the fifties—the music, the insularity of suburban life, the fears symbolized by the bomb shelter in the Chandler basement—with economy and precision. Then he grabs this spectacularly stupid piece of never-was mythology by its hem and turns it inside-out with breathtaking ease.

To begin with, father certainly doesn't know best in young David's family; this father is a compulsive philanderer whose marriage is hanging by a thread.

David knows it, too.

“My father had plenty of opportunity for affairs and he took them,” he says.

“He met them late and he met them early.” It’s a thin whip crack of irony, but loaded with a bead of shot at the tip, just the same; you’re already moving on when you realize it stings a little.

Meg and Susan have washed up at the Chandler house as a result of a car accident (someone should do a

study someday on The Ever-Popular Car Accident and Its Impact on American Literature). At first it seems they will fit in nicely with Ruth’s boys—Woofer, Donny, Willie, Jr.—and with Ruth herself, the sort of easygoing woman who yarns a lot, smokes a lot, and isn’t above offering the boys a beer out of the fridge, if they promise to keep quiet about it to their parents.

Ketchum gives wonderful dialogue and Ruth’s got a great voice, hard-edged and just a trifle raspy in the mind’s ear.

“Take a lesson, boys,” she says at one point.

“Remember this. It’s important. All you got to do any time is be nice to a woman—and she’ll do all sorts of good things for you... Davey was nice to Meg and got himself a painting... Girls are plain easy... Promise ‘em a little something and you can have what you want half the time.”

The perfect healing environment and the perfect adult authority-figure for a couple of traumatized girls, one might think except this is Jack Ketchum we’re dealing with here, and Jack Ketchum don’t play that way. Never did, probably never will.

Ruth, for all her cheerfully cynical, waitress-with-a-heart-of-gold exterior, is losing her grip on sanity, spiraling into a hell of violence and paranoia. She is a hideous but oddly prosaic villain, a perfect choice for the Eisenhower years. We’re never told what is wrong with her; it is not by accident that the talismanic phrase held in common by Ruth and the children who spend time at her house is Don’t mention it. That phrase could be a summation of the fifties, and in this novel everyone takes and it to heart until it is much too late to avert the final convulsions.

In the end, Ketchum is less interested in Ruth than he is in the kids—not just the

Chandler boys and David, but all the others that drift in and out of the Chandler basement while Meg is slowly being murdered. It is Eddie that Ketchum cares about, and Denise, and Tony,

and Kenny, and Glen, and the whole daffy fifties gang,

the boys with flattops Butch-Waxed in front and scabs on their knees from playing baseball. Some, like David, do little more than watch. Others end up participating, right of up to the point where they collaborate in stitching the words I FUCK FUCK ME across Meg's midriff with hot needles. They wander in... they wander out... they watch TV... they drink Cokes and eat peanut butter sandwiches... and no one tells. No one puts a stop to what's going on in the shelter. It is a nightmare scenario, Happy Days crossed with A Clockwork Orange, The Life and Loves of Dobie Gillis in a crazed mating with The Collector. It works not because of Ketchum's perfect suburban pitch but because we are forced to believe, against our wills, that with the right combination of alienated children and the right adult overseeing the horror and, above, all, with the right atmosphere of mind-your-own-business to work in, this might be possible. It was, after all, the era in which a woman named Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death over a period of several hours in a New York alley. She screamed repeatedly for help and there were plenty of people who saw what was happening, but no one did anything to stop it. No one even called the cops.

Don't mention it must have been their motto... and how much of a step is it, really, from don't mention it to let's help?

David, the narrator, is the novel's one essentially decent character, and as such he is probably right in blaming himself for the final holocaust in Ruth Chandler's basement; decency is a responsibility as well as a state of being, and as the one human present who understands that what's happening is evil, he is ultimately more culpable than the morally vacant children who burn, cut, and sexually abuse the girl next door. David takes part in none of these things, but neither does he tell his parents what's going on in the Chandler house or report it to the police. Part of him even wants to be part of it. We feel a kind of satisfaction when Davey finally does step in—it's the one cold ray of sunshine Ketchum allows us—but we also hate him for not doing it sooner.

If hate was all we felt for this misbegotten narrator, *The Girl Next Door* would fall off the moral tightrope it walks, as Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*

did. But David is perhaps Ketchum's most triumphantly realized character, miles from Ellis's porno-cyphers, and his complexity gives this book a resonance which is not always present in his earlier novels. We feel pity for him, we understand his initial reluctance to peach on Ruth Chandler, who treats kids as human beings instead of nuisances that are always did getting underfoot, and we also understand his ultimately lethal inability to grasp the reality of what's happening.

"And then sometimes it was... like the kind of

/t to movies that came along later in the Sixties," David says.

"Foreign movies, mostly—where the dominant feeling you had was of inhabiting some fascinating, hypnotic in density of obscure illusion, or layers and layers of meaning that in the end indicated a total absence of well meaning, where actors with cardboard faces moved who passively through surreal nightmare landscapes, empty is of emotions, adrift."

For me, the brilliance of *The Girl Next Door* stems from the fact that, in the end, I accepted David as a valid but part of my world-view, as valid—and in some ways as the unwelcome—as Lou Ford, the psychotic sheriff who laughs and beats and kills his way through the pages of Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*.

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Of course, David is much more decent than Lou

Ford.

That's what makes him so awful.

Jack Ketchum is a brilliantly visceral novelist whose bleak perception of human nature is perhaps only rivaled by that of Frank Norris and Malcolm Lowry. He has been presented to his readers as the creator of suspenseful page-turners (the Warner paperback of *The Girl Next Door* appeared with a skeletal cheerleader on

the cover, an image which has nothing to do with anything beneath it; the book looks like either a VC.

Andrews gothic or an R.L. Stine “camp-horror” juvenile). He is suspenseful, and his novels are page turners but the cover and presentation still misrepresent him as completely as the covers of Jim Thompson’s novels misrepresented him. *The Girl Next Door* is alive in a way no VC Andrews novel ever was, in a way most works of popular fiction never attain; it does not just promise terror but actually delivers it. But it’s a page turner all right; no doubt about that. These are pages you will dread to turn, and turn anyway. Ketchum’s thematic ambitions are quiet but large; they do not, however, interfere with the novelist’s main task, which is to beguile the reader’s whole attention by fair means or foul. Most of Ketchum’s are foul... but boy, do they ever work.

The Girl Next Door is a long way from the stupid schmaltz of *Slow Dance in Cedar Bend* or the harmless, heroic shenanigans of *The Rainmaker*, which may be why Ketchum isn’t known to people who confine their reading to the New York Times best sellers. Nevertheless, we would be poorer in terms of our literary experience without him, it seems to me. He is a genuine iconoclast, a writer who is really good, one of the few outside of the Chosen Circle who really matter. Jim Thompson’s work has remained constantly in print and constantly read long after the works of many in the Chosen Circle of his own day have fallen out of print and thought. The same thing is almost certainly going to happen with Jack Ketchum... except I would like to see it happen to him before he dies, as was the case with Thompson. An edition such as this, which is sure to attract attention and comment, is a step in that direction.

Bangor, Maine June 24, 1995

Do You got to tell me brave captain 1 Why are the wicked so strong?

How do the angels get to sleep When the devil leaves the porch light on? a

—Tom Waits

I never want to hear the screams Of the teenage girls in other people’s dreams. d

—The Specials

The soul under the burden of sin cannot flee. a

—Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn*

You think you know about pain?

Talk to my second wife. She does. Or she thinks she does.

She says that once when she was nineteen or twenty she got between a couple of cats fighting—her own cat and a neighbor's—and one of them went at her, climbed her like a tree, tore gashes out of her thighs and breasts and belly that you still can see today, scared her so badly she fell back against her mother's turn-of-the-century Hoosier, breaking her best ceramic pie plate and scraping six inches of skin off her ribs while the cat made its way back down her again, all tooth and claw and spitting fury. Thirty-six stitches I think she said she got. And a fever that lasted days.

My second wife says that's pain.

She doesn't know shit, that woman.

Evelyn, my first wife, has maybe gotten closer.

There's an image that haunts her.

She is driving down a rain-slick highway on a hot summer morning in a rented Volvo, her lover by her side, driving slowly and carefully because she knows how treacherous new rain on hot streets can be, when a Volkswagen passes her and fishtails into her lane. Its rear bumper with the "Live Free or Die" plates slides over and kisses her grille.

Almost gently. The rain does the rest. The Volvo reels, swerves, glides over an embankment and suddenly she and her lover are tumbling through space, they are weightless and turning, and up is down and then up and then down again. At some point the steering wheel breaks her shoulder. The rear view mirror cracks her wrist.

Then the rolling stops and she's staring up at the gas pedal overhead. She looks for her lover but he isn't there anymore; he's disappeared, it's magic. She finds the door on the driver's side and opens it, crawls out onto wet grass, stands and peers through the rain. And this is the image that haunts her—a man like a sack of blood, flayed, skinned alive, lying in front of the car in a spray of glass spackled red.

This sack is her lover.

And this is why she's closer. Even though she blocks what she knows—even though she sleeps nights.

She knows that pain is not just a matter of hurting, of her own startled body complaining at some invasion of the flesh.

Pain can work from the outside in.

I mean that sometimes what you see is pain. Pain in its crudest, purest form. Without drugs or sleep or even shock or coma to dull it for you.

You see it and you take it in. And then it's you.

You're host to a long white worm that gnaws and eats, growing, filling your intestines until finally you cough one morning and up comes the blind pale head of the thing sliding from your mouth like a second tongue.

Volvo reels, I No, my wives don't know about that. Not exactly.

y she and Though Evelyn is close.

“wightless and

An again. At But I do.

Mteilder. The You'll have to trust me on that for starters.

Hb k' I if It I have for a very long time.

M'tthegas j1 isn't there i try to remember that we were all kids when these tk J
“re door on things happened, just kids, barely out of our Davy Crockett is (t
grass, coonskin caps for God's sake, not fully formed. It's much too j* mage that
hard to believe that what I am today is what I was then except r-'ied alive,

hidden now and disguised. Kids get second chances. I like to think I'm using mine.

Though after two divorces, bad ones, the worm is apt to gnaw a little.

Iros Still I like to remember that it was the Fifties, a period of strange repressions, secrets, hysteria. I think about Joe

McCarthy, though I barely remember thinking of him at all back then except to wonder what it was that would make my j H father race home from work every day to catch the committee |1 hearings on TV. I think about the Cold War. About air-raids f | drills in the school basement and films we saw of atomic testing—department-store mannequins imploding, blown across mockup living rooms, disintegrating, burning. About copies of Playboy and Man's Action hidden in wax paper back by the brook, so moldy after a while that you hated to touch them. I think about Elvis being denounced by the Reverend Deitz at Grace Lutheran Church when I was ten and the rock 'n' roll riots at Alan Freed's shows at the Paramount.

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I say to myself something weird was happening, some great American boil about to burst. That it was happening all over, not just at Ruth's house but everywhere.

And sometimes that makes it easier.

What we did.

I'm forty-one now. Born in 1946, seventeen months to the day after we dropped the Bomb on Hiroshima.

Matisse had just turned eighty.

I make a hundred fifty grand a year, working the floor on Wall Street. Two marriages, no kids. A home in Rye and a company apartment in the city. Most places I go I use limousines, though in Rye I drive a blue Mercedes.

It may be that I'm about to marry again. The woman I r* love knows nothing of what I'm writing here—nor did my other wives—and I don't really know if I ever mean to tell her. Why should I? I'm successful, even-tempered, generous, a

careful and considerate lover.

And nothing in my life has been right since the summer of 1958, when Ruth and Donny and Willie and all the rest of us met Meg Loughlin and her sister Susan.

I was alone back by the brook, lying on my stomach across the Big Rock with a tin can in my hand. I was scooping up crayfish. I had two of them already in a larger can beside me. Little ones. I was looking for their mama.

The brook ran fast along either side of me. I could feel the spray on my bare feet dangling near the water. The water was cold, the sun warm.

I heard a sound in the bushes and looked up. The prettiest girl I'd ever seen was smiling at me over the embankment.

She had long tanned legs and long red hair tied back in a ponytail, wore shorts and a pale-colored blouse open at the neck. I was twelve and a half. She was older.

I remember smiling back at her, though I was rarely agreeable to strangers.

"Crayfish," I said. I dumped out a tin of water.

"Really?"

I nodded.

"Big ones?"

"Not these. You can find them, though."

"Can I see?"

She dropped down off the bank just like a boy would, not sitting first, just putting her left hand to the ground and vaulting the three-foot drop to the first big stone in the line that led zigzag across the water. She studied the line a moment and then crossed to the Rock. I was impressed. She had no hesitation and her balance was perfect. I made room for her. There was suddenly this fine clean smell sitting next to me.

Her eyes were green. She looked around.

To all of us back then the Rock was something special.

It sat smack in the middle of the deepest part of the brook, the water running clear and fast around it. You had room for four kids sitting or six standing up. It had been a pirate ship, Nemo's Nautilus, and a canoe for the Lenni Lennape among other things. Today the water was maybe three and a half feet deep. She seemed happy to be there, not scared at all.

"We call this the Big Rock," I said.

"We used to, I mean. When we were kids."

"I like it," she said.

"Can I see the crayfish? I'm Meg."

"I'm David. Sure."

She peered down into the can. Time went by and we said nothing. She studied them. Then she straightened up again.

"Neat."

"I just catch 'em and look at 'em a while and then let them go."

"—"

"Do they bite?"

"The big ones do. They can't hurt you, though. And the little ones just try to run."

"They look like lobsters."

"You never saw a crayfish before?"

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"Don't think they have them in New York City." She laughed. I didn't mind.

“We get lobsters, though. They can hurt you.”

“Can you keep one? I mean, you can’t keep a lobster like a pet or anything, right?”

She laughed again.

“No. You eat them.”

“You can’t keep a crayfish either. They die. One day or maybe two, tops. I hear people eat them too, though.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Some do. In Louisiana or Florida or someplace.”

We looked down into the can.

“I don’t know,” she said, smiling.

“There’s not a whole lot to eat down there.”

“Let’s get some big ones.”

We lay across the Rock side by side. I took the can and slipped both arms down into the brook. The trick was to turn the stones one at a time, slowly so as not to muddy the water, then have the can there ready for whatever scooted out from under. The water was so deep I had my short-sleeved shirt rolled all the way up to my shoulders. I was aware of how long and skinny my arms must look to her. I know they looked that way to me.

I felt pretty strange beside her, actually.

Uncomfortable but excited. She was different from the other girls I knew, from Denise or Cheryl on the block or even the girls at school. For one thing she was maybe a hundred times prettier. As far as I was concerned she was prettier than Natalie Wood. Probably she was smarter than the girls I knew too, more sophisticated. She lived in New York City I just didn’t know after all and had eaten lobsters. And she moved just like a boy. She had this strong hard body and easy grace about her.

All that made me nervous and I missed the first one.

Not an enormous crayfish but bigger than what we had. It scudded backward beneath the Rock.

She asked if she could try. I gave her the can.

“New York City, huh?”

“Yup.”

She rolled up her sleeves and dipped down into the water. And that was when I noticed the scar.

“Jeez. What’s that?”

It started just inside her left elbow and ran down to the wrist like a long pink twisted worm. She saw where I was looking.

“Accident,” she said.

“We were in a car.” Then she looked back into the water where you could see her reflection shimmering.

“Jeez.”

But then she didn’t seem to want to talk much after that.

“Got any more of ‘em?”

I don’t know why scars are always so fascinating to boys, but they are, it’s a fact of life, and I just couldn’t help it. I couldn’t shut up about it yet. Even though I knew she wanted me to, even though we’d just met. I watched her turn over a rock. There was nothing under it. She did it correctly though; she didn’t muddy the water. I thought she was terrific.

She shrugged.

“A few. That’s the worst.”

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“Can I see them?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

She laughed and looked at me a certain way and I got the message. And then I did shut up for a while.

She turned another rock. Nothing.

“I guess it was a bad one, huh? The accident?”

She didn’t answer that at all and I didn’t blame her. I knew how stupid and awkward it sounded, how insensitive, the moment I said it. I blushed and was glad she wasn’t looking.

Then she got one.

The rock slid over and the crayfish backed right out into the can and all she had to do was bring it up.

She poured off some water and tilted the can toward the sunlight. You could see that nice gold color they have. Its tail was up and its pincers waving and it was stalking the bottom of the can, looking for somebody to fight.

“You got her!”

“First try!”

“Great! She’s really great.”

“Let’s put her in with the others.”

She poured the water out slowly so as not to disturb her or lose her exactly the way you were supposed to, though nobody had told her, and then when there was only an inch or so left in the can, plunked her into the bigger can. The two that were already in there gave her plenty of room. That was good because crayfish would kill each other sometimes, they’d kill their own kind, and these two others were just little guys.

In a while the new one calmed down and we sat there watching her. She looked

primitive, efficient, deadly, beautiful.

Very pretty color and very sleek of design.

I stuck my finger in the can to stir her up again.

“Don’t.”

Her hand was on my arm. It was cool and soft.

I took my finger out again.

I offered her a stick of Wrigley’s and took one myself.

Then all you could hear for a while was the wind whooshing through the tall thin grass across the embankment and rustling the brush along the brook and the sound of the brook running fast from last night’s rain, and us chewing.

“You’ll put them back, right? You promise?”

“Sure. I always do.”

“Good.”

She sighed and then stood up.

“I’ve got to get back I guess. We’ve got shopping to do. But I wanted to look around first thing. I mean, we’ve never had a woods before. Thanks, David. It was fun.”

She was halfway across the stones by the time I thought to ask her.

“Hey! Back where? Where are you going?”

She smiled.

“We’re staying with the Chandlers. Susan and I. Susan’s my sister.”

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Then I stood too, like somebody had jerked me to my feet on invisible strings.

“The Chandlers? Ruth? Donny and Willie’s mom?”

She finished crossing and turned and stared at me.

And something in her face was different now all of a sudden.

Cautious.

It stopped me.

“That’s right. We’re cousins. Second cousins. I’m Ruth’s niece I guess.”

Her voice had gone odd on me too. It sounded flat—like there was something I wasn’t supposed to know.

Like she was telling me something and hiding it at the same time.

It confused me for a moment. I had the feeling that maybe it confused her too.

It was the first I’d seen her flustered. Even including the stuff about the scar.

I didn’t let it bother me though.

Because the Chandlers’ house was right next door to my house.

And Ruth was... well, Ruth was great. Even if her kids were jerks sometimes. Ruth was great.

“Hey!” I said.

“We’re neighbors! Mine’s the brown house next door!”

I watched her climb the embankment. When she got to the top she turned and her smile was back again, the clean open look she’d had when she first sat down beside me on the Rock.

She waved.

“See you, David.”

“See you, Meg.”

Neat, I thought. Incredible. I’ll be seeing her all the time.

It was the first such thought I’d ever had.

I realize that now.

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That day, on that Rock, I met my adolescence head-on in the person of Megan Loughlin, a stranger two years older than I was, with a sister, a secret, and long red hair. That it seemed so natural to me, that I emerged unshaken and even happy about the experience I think said much for my future possibilities—and of course for hers.

When I think of that, I hate Ruth Chandler.

Ruth, you were beautiful then.

I’ve thought about you a lot—no, I’ve researched you, I’ve gone that far, dug into your past, parked across the street one day from that Howard Avenue office building you were always telling us about, where you ran the whole damn show while the Boys were away fighting The Big One, the War to End All Wars Part Two—that place where you were utterly, absolutely indispensable until the “little GI pukers came strutting back home again,” as you put it, and suddenly you were out of a job. I parked there and it looked ordinary, Ruth. It looked squalid and sad and boring.

I drove to Morristown where you were born and that was nothing too. Of course I didn’t know where your house was supposed to be but I certainly couldn’t see your grand disappointed dreams being born there either, in that town, I couldn’t see the riches your parents supposedly thrust upon you, showered you with, I couldn’t see your wild frustration.

I sat in your husband Willie Sr.’s bar—yes!—!found him Ruth! In Fort Myers, Florida, where he’d been ever since he left you with your three squalling brats and a mortgage all these thirty years ago, I found him playing barkeep to the senior citizens, a mild man, amiable, long past his prime—I sat there [} 28 d and looked at his face and into his eyes and we talked and I couldn’t see the man you

always said he was, the stud, the “‘lovely Irish bastard,” that mean sonovabitch. He looked like a man gone soft and old to me. A drinker’s nose, a drinker’s gut, a fat fallen ass in a pair of baggy britches. And he looked like he’d never been hard, Ruth. Never. That was the surprise, really.

Like the hardness was elsewhere.

So what was it, Ruth? All lies? All your own inventions?

I wouldn’t put it past you.

Or maybe it was that for you—funneled through you—lies and truth were the same.

I’m going to try to change that now if I can. I’m going to tell our little story. Straight as I can from here on in and no interruptions.

And I’m writing this for you, Ruth. Because I never got to pay you back, really.

So here’s my check. Overdue and overdrawn.

Cash it in hell.

Early the following morning I walked next door.

I remember feeling shy about it, a little awkward, and that was pretty unusual because nothing could have been more natural than to see what was going on over there.

It was morning. It was summer. And that was what you did. You got up, ate breakfast and then you went outside and looked around to see who was where.

The Chandler house was the usual place to start.

Laurel Avenue was a dead-end street back then—it isn’t anymore—a single shallow cut into the half-circle of woodland that bordered the south side of West Maple and ran back for maybe a mile behind it. When the road was first cut during the early 1800s the woods were so thick with tall first growth timber they called it Dark Lane. That timber was all gone by now but it was still a quiet, pretty street. Shade trees everywhere, each house different from the one beside it

and not too close together like some you saw.

There were still only thirteen homes on the block.

Ruth's, ours, five others going up the hill on our side of the street and six on the opposite.

Every family but the Zorns had kids. And every kid knew every other kid like he knew his own brother. So if you d 31 u wanted company you could always find some back by the brook or the crab apple grove or up in somebody's yard- whoever had the biggest plastic pool that year or the target for bow and arrow.

If you wanted to get lost that was easy too. The woods were deep.

The Dead End Kids, we called ourselves.

It had always been a closed circle.

We had our own set of rules, our own mysteries, our own secrets. We had a pecking order and we applied it with a vengeance. We were used to it that way.

But now there was somebody new on the block. Somebody new over at Ruth's place.

It felt funny.

Especially because it was that somebody.

Especially because it was that place.

It felt pretty damn funny indeed.

Ralphie was squatting out by the rock garden. It was maybe eight o'clock and already he was dirty. There were streaks of sweat and grime all over his face and arms and legs like he'd been running all morning and falling down thwack in deep clouds of dust. Falling frequently. Which he probably had, knowing Ralphie. Ralphie was ten years old and I don't think I'd ever seen him clean for more than fifteen minutes in my life. His shorts and T-shirt were crusty too.

"Hey, Woofer."

Except for Ruth, nobody called him Ralphie—always Woofer. When he wanted to be could sound more like the Robertsons' basset hound Mitsy than Mitsy could.

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“Hiya, Dave.”

He was turning over rocks, watching potato bugs and thousand-loggers scurry away from the light. But I could see he wasn't interested in them. He kept moving one rock after the other. Turning them over, dropping them down again. He had a Libby's lima beans can beside him and he kept on shifting that too, keeping it close beside his scabby knees as he went from rock to rock.

“What's in the can?”

“Nightcrawlers,” he said. He still hadn't looked at me.

He was concentrating, frowning, moving with that jerky nervous energy that was patented Woofer. Like he was a scientist in a lab on the brink of some incredible fantastic discovery and he wished you'd just leave him the hell alone to get on with it.

He flipped another rock.

“Donny around?”

“Yep.” He nodded.

Which meant that Donny was inside. And since I felt kind of nervous about going inside I stayed with him awhile.

He upended a big one. And apparently found what he was after.

Red ants. A swarm of them down there beneath the rock—hundreds, thousands of them. All going crazy with the sudden light.

I've never been fond of ants. We used to put up pots of water to boil and then pour it on them whenever they decided it would be nice to climb the front-porch steps over at our place—which for some reason they did about once every

summer. It was my dad's idea, but I endorsed it entirely. I thought boiling water was just about what ants deserved.

I could smell their iodine smell along with wet earth and wet cut grass.

Woofer pushed the rock away and then reached into the Libby's can. He dug out a nightcrawler and then a second one and dumped them in with the ants.

He did this from a distance of about three feet. Like he was bombing the ants with worm meat.

The ants responded. The worms began rolling and bucking as the ants discovered their soft pink flesh.

"Sick, Woofer," I said.

"That's really sick."

"I found some black ones over there," he said. He pointed to a rock on the opposite side of the porch.

"You know, the big ones. Gonna collect 'em and put 'em in with these guys here. Start an ant war. You want to bet who wins?"

"The red ants will win," I said.

"The red ants always win."

It was true. The red ants were ferocious. And this game was not new to me.

"I got another idea," I said.

"Why don't you stick your hand in there? Pretend you're Son of Kong or something."

He looked at me. I could tell he was considering it.

Then he smiled.

"Naw," he said.

“That’s retarded.”

I got up. The worms were still squirming.

“See you, Woof,” I said.

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I climbed the stairs to the porch. I knocked on the screen door and went inside.

Donny was sprawled on the couch wearing nothing but a pair of wrinkled white slept-in boxer shorts. He was only three months older than I was but much bigger in the chest and shoulders and now, recently, he was developing a pretty good belly, following in the footsteps of his brother, Willie Jr.

It was not a beautiful thing to see and I wondered where Meg was now.

He looked up at me from a copy of Plastic Man.

Personally I’d pretty much quit the comics since the Comic Code came in in ‘54 and you couldn’t get Web of Mystery anymore.

“How you doin’, Dave?”

Ruth had been ironing. The board was leaning up in a corner and you could smell that sharp musky tang of clean, superheated fabric.

I looked around.

“Pretty good. Where’s everybody?”

He shrugged.

“Went shopping.”

“Willie went shopping? You’re kidding.”

He closed the comic and got up, smiling, scratching his armpit.

“Naw. Willie’s got a nine-o’clock appointment with the dentist. Willie’s got cavities. Ain’t it a killer?”

Donny and Willie Jr.had been born an hour and a half apart but for some reason Willie Jr.had very soft teeth and Donny didn't.He was always at the dentist's.

We laughed.

"I hear you met her."

"Who?"

Donny looked at me.I guess I wasn't fooling anybody.| "Oh, your cousin.Yeah.Down by the Rock yesterday.

She caught a crayfish first try."| Donny nodded.

"She's good at stuff," he said.It wasn't exactly enthusiastic praise, but for Donny—and especially for Donny talking about a girl—it was pretty respectful.

"C'mon," he said.

"Wait here while I get dressed and we'll go see what Eddie's doing."

I groaned.

Of all the kids on Laurel Avenue Eddie was the one I tried to stay away from.Eddie was crazy.

I remember Eddie walking down the street once in the middle of a stickball game we were playing stripped to the waist with a big live black snake stuck between his teeth.

Nature Boy.He threw it at Woofer, who screamed, and then at Billy Borkman.In fact he kept picking it up and throwing it at all the little kids and chasing them waving the snake until the concussion of hitting the road so many times sort of got to the snake eventually and it wasn't much fun anymore.

Eddie got you in trouble.

Eddie's idea of a great time was to do something dangerous or illegal, preferably both—walk the crossbeams of a house under construction or pelt crab apples at cars from Canoe Brook Bridge—and maybe get away with it.If you got caught

or hurt that was okay, that was funny.If he got caught or hurt it was still funny.

Linda and Betty Martin swore they saw him bite off the head of a frog once.Nobody doubted it.

His house was at the top of the street on the opposite side from us, and Tony and Lou Morino, who lived next door, said they heard his father beating up on him all the time.

Practically every night.His mother and sister got it too.I remember his mother, a big gentle woman with rough thick peasant hands, crying over coffee in the kitchen with my mom, her right eye a great big puffy shiner.

My dad said Mr.Crocker was nice enough sober but a mean drunk.I didn't know about that but Eddie had inherited his father's temper and you never knew when it would go off on you.When it did, he was as likely to pick up a stick or a rock as use his hands.We all bore the scars somewhere.

I'd been on the receiving end more than once.Now I tried to stay away.

Donny and Willie liked him though.Life with Eddie was exciting, you had to give him that much.Though even they knew Eddie was crazy.

Around Eddie they got crazy too.

"Tell you what," I said.

"I'll walk you up.But I'm not gonna hang around up there."

"Ahh, come on."

"I've got other stuff to do."

"What stuff?"

"Just stuff."

"What're you gonna do, go home and listen to your mother's Perry Como records?"

I gave him a look.He knew he was out of line.

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We were all El vis fans.

He laughed.

“Suit yourself, sport. Just wait up a minute. I’ll be right there.”

He went down the hall to his bedroom and it occurred to me to wonder how they were working that now that Meg and Susan were there, just who was sleeping where. I walked over to the couch and picked up his Plastic Man. I flipped the pages and put it down again. Then I wandered from the living room to the dining area where Ruth’s clean laundry lay folded on the table and finally into the kitchen. I opened the Frigidaire. As usual there was food for sixty.

I called to Donny.

“Okay to have a Coke?”

“Sure. And open one for me, will ya?”

I took out the Cokes, pulled open the right-hand drawer and got the bottle opener. Inside the silverware was stacked all neat and tidy. It always struck me as weird how Ruth had all this food all the time yet had service only for five—five spoons, five forks, five knives, five steak knives, and no soup spoons at all. Of course except for us Ruth never had any company that I knew of. But now there were six people living there. I wondered if she’d finally have to break down and buy some more.

I opened the bottles. Donny came out and I handed him one. He was wearing jeans and Keds and a T-shirt. The T-shirt was tight over his belly. I gave it a little pat there.

“Better watch it, Donald,” I said.

“Better watch it yourself, homo.”

“Oh, that’s right, I’m a homo, right?”

“You’re a retard is what you are.”

“I’m a retard?You’re a skank.”

“Skank?Girls are skanks.Girls and homos are skanks.You’re the skank.I’m the Duke of Earl.”He punctuated it with a punch to the arm which I returned, and we jostled a little.

Donny and I were as close to best friends as boys got in those days.

We went out through the back door into the yard, then around the driveway to the front, and started up to Eddie’s.

It was a matter of honor to ignore the sidewalk.We walked in the middle of the street.We sipped our Cokes.There was never any traffic anyway.

“Your brother’s maiming worms in the rock garden,” I told him.

He glanced back over his shoulder.

“Cute little fella, ain’t he,” “So how do you like it?”I asked him.

“Like what?”

“Having Meg and her sister around?”

He shrugged.

“Don’t know.They just got here.”He took a swig of Coke, belched, and smiled.

“That Meg’s pretty cute, though, ain’t she?Shit!My cousin!”

I didn’t want to comment, though I agreed with him.

“Second cousin, though, you know?Makes a difference.Blood or something.I dunno.Before, we never saw ‘em.”

“Never?”

“My mom says once.I was too young to remember.”

“What’s her sister like?”

“Susan? Like nothing. Just a little kid. What is she, eleven or something?”

“Woofers only ten.”

“Yeah, right. And what’s Woofers?”

You couldn’t argue there.

“Got messed up bad in that accident, though.”

“Susan?”

He nodded and pointed to my waist.

“Yeah. Broke everything from there on down, my mom says. Every bone you got. Hips, legs, everything.”

“Jeez.”

“She still don’t walk too good. She’s all casted up. Got those—what do you call ‘em?—metal things, sticks, that strap on to your arms and you grab ‘em, haul yourself along. Kids with polio wear ‘em. I forget what they’re called. Like crutches.”

“Jeez. Is she going to walk again?”

“She walks.”

“I mean like regular.”

“I dunno.”

We finished our Cokes. We were almost at the top of the hill. It was almost time for me to leave him there. That or suffer Eddie.

“They both died, y’know,” he said.

Just like that.

I knew who he meant, of course, but for a moment I just couldn't get my mind to wrap around it. Not right away.

It was much too weird a concept.

Parents didn't just die. Not on my street. And certainly not in car accidents. That kind of thing happened elsewhere, [] 40 ü in places more dangerous than Laurel Avenue. They happened in movies or in books. You heard about it on Walter Cronkite.

Laurel Avenue was a dead-end street. You walked down the middle of it.

But I knew he wasn't lying. I remembered Meg not wanting to talk about the accident or the scars and me pushing.

I knew he wasn't lying but it was hard to handle.

We just kept walking together, me not saying anything, just looking at him and not really seeing him either.

Seeing Meg.

It was a very special moment.

I know Meg attained a certain glamour for me then.

Suddenly it was not just that she was pretty or smart or able to handle herself crossing the brook—she was almost unreal. Like no one I'd ever met or was likely to meet outside of books or the Matinee. Like she was fiction, some sort of heroine.

I pictured her back by the Rock and now I saw this person who was really brave lying next to me. I saw horror.

Suffering, survival, disaster.

Tragedy.

All this in an instant.

Probably I had my mouth open. I guess Donny thought I didn't know what he

was talking about.

“Meg’s parents, numb nuts Both of ‘em. My mom says they must have died instantly. That they didn’t know what hit ‘em.” He snorted.

“Fact is, what hit ‘em was a Chrysler.”

And it may have been his rich bad taste that pulled me back to normal.

“I saw the scar on her arm,” I told him.

“Yeah, I saw it, too. Neat, huh? You should see Susan’s though. Scars all over the place. Gross. My mom says she’s lucky to be alive.”

“She probably is.”

“Anyhow that’s how come we’ve got ‘em. There isn’t anybody else. It’s us or some orphanage somewhere.” He smiled.

“Lucky them, huh?”

And then he said something that came back to me later. At the time I guessed it was true enough, but for some reason I remembered it. I remembered it well.

He said it just as we got to Eddie’s house, r

I see myself standing in the middle of the road about to turn and go back down the hill again, go off by myself somewhere, not wanting any part of Eddie—at least not that day.

I see Donny turning to throw the words over his shoulder on his way across the lawn to the porch. Casually, but with an odd sort of sincerity about him, as though this were absolute gospel.

“My mom says Meg’s the lucky one,” he said.

“My mom says she got off easy.”

It was a week and a half before I got to see her again apart from a glimpse here and there—taking out the trash once, weeding in the garden. Now that I knew the whole story it was even harder to approach her. I’d never felt so shy. I’d rehearse

what I might say to her. But nothing sounded right. What did you say to someone who'd just lost half her family? It stood there like a rock I couldn't scale. So I avoided her.

Then my family and I did our yearly duty trip to Sussex County to visit my father's sister, so for four whole days I didn't have to think about it. It was almost a relief. I say almost because my parents were less than two years from divorce by then and the trip was awful—three tense days of silence in the car going up and coming back with a lot of phony jolliness in between that was supposed to benefit my aunt and uncle but didn't. You could see my aunt and uncle looking at one another every now and then as if to say Jesus, get these people out of here.

They knew. Everybody knew. My parents couldn't have hidden pennies from a blind man by then.

But once we were home it was back to wondering about Meg again. I don't know why it never occurred to me just to forget it, that she might not want to be reminded of her parents' death any more than I wanted to talk about it.

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But it didn't. I figured you had to say something and I couldn't get it right. It was important to me that I not make an ass of myself over this. It was important to me that I not make an ass of myself in Meg's eyes period.

I wondered about Susan too. In nearly two weeks I'd never seen her. That ran contrary to everything I knew. How could you live next door to someone and never see her? I thought about her legs and Donny saying her scars were really bad to look at. Maybe she was afraid to go out. I could relate to that. I'd been spending a lot of time indoors myself these days, avoiding her sister.

It couldn't last though. It was the first week of June by then, time for the Kiwanis Karnival.

To miss the Karnival was like missing summer./

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Directly across from us not half a block away was an old six-room schoolhouse called Central School where we all used to go as little kids, grades one through

five. They held the Karnival there on the playground every year. Ever since we were old enough to be allowed to cross the street we'd go over and watch them set up.

For that one week, being that close, we were the luckiest kids in town.

Only the concessions were run by the Kiwanis—the food stands, the game booths, the wheels of fortune. The rides were all handled by a professional touring company and run by carnies. To us the carnies were exotic as hell. Roughlooking men and women who worked with Camels stuck between their teeth, squinting against the smoke curling into their eyes, sporting tattoos and calluses and scars and smelling of grease and old sweat. They cursed, they drank Schlitz as they worked. Like us, they were not opposed to spitting lungers in the dirt.

We loved the Karnival and we loved the carnies. You had to. In a single summer afternoon they would take our playground and transform it from a pair of baseball diamonds, a blacktop, and a soccer field into a brand-new city of canvas and whirling steel. They did it so fast you could hardly believe your eyes. It was magic, and the magicians all had gold-tooth smiles and “I love Velma” etched into their biceps.

Irresistible.

It was still pretty early and when I walked over they were still unpacking the trucks.

This was when you couldn't talk to them. They were too busy. Later while they were setting up or testing the machinery you could hand them tools, maybe even get a sip of beer out of them. The local kids were their bread and butter after all. They wanted you to come back that night with friends and family and they were usually friendly. But now you just had to watch and keep out of the way.

Cheryl and Denise were already there, leaning on the backstop fence behind home plate and staring through the links.

I stood with them.

Things seemed tense to me. You could see why. It was only morning but the sky looked dark and threatening. Once, a few years ago, it had rained every night of

the Karnival except Thursday. Everybody took a beating when that happened. The grips and carnies worked grimly now, in silence.

Cheryl and Denise lived up the street across from one another. They were friends but I think only because of what Zelda Gilroy on The Dobie Gillis Show used to call propinquity.

They didn't have much in common. Cheryl was a tall skinny brunette who would probably be pretty a few years later but now she was all arms and legs, taller than I was and two years younger. She had two brothers—Kenny and Malcolm. Malcolm was just a little kid who sometimes played with Woofer. Kenny was almost my age but a year behind me in school.

All three kids were very quiet and well-behaved. Their parents, the Robertsons, took no shit but I doubt that by nature they were disposed to give any.

Denise was Eddie's sister. Another type entirely.

Denise was edgy, nervous, almost as reckless as her brother, with a marked propensity toward mockery. As though all the world were a bad joke and she was the only one around who knew the punchline.

"It's David," she said. And there was the mockery, just pronouncing my name. I didn't like it but I ignored it.

That was the way to handle Denise. If she got no rise she got no payoff and it made her more normal eventually.

"Hi Cheryl. Denise. How're they doing?"

Denise said, "I think that's the Tilt-a-Whirl there. Last year that's where they put the Octopus."

"It could still be the Octopus," said Cheryl.

"Unh-unh. See those platforms?" She pointed to the wide sheets of metal.

"The Tilt-a-Whirl's got platforms. Wait till they get the cars out. You'll see."

She was right. When the cars came out it was the Tilt-a-Whirl. Like her father and

her brother Eddie, Denise was good at mechanical things, good with tools.

“They’re worried about rain,” she said.

“ They’re worried.”said Cheryl.

“I’m worried!”She sighed in exasperation. It was very exaggerated. I smiled.

There was always something sweetly serious about Cheryl.

You just knew her favorite book was Alice in Wonderland.

The truth was, I liked her.

“It won’t rain,” Denise said.

“How do you know?”

“It just won’t.”Like she wouldn’t let it.

“See that there?”She pointed to a huge gray and white truck rolling back to the center of the soccer field.

“I bet that’s the Ferris wheel.That’s where they had it last year and the year before.Want to see?”

“Sure,” I said.

We skirted the Tilt-a-Whirl and some kiddie boat rides they were unloading on the macadam, walked along the cyclone fence that separated the playground from the brook, cut through a row of tents going up for the ring-toss and bottle-throw and whatever, and came out onto the field.The grips had just opened the doors to the truck.The painted grinning clown head on the doors was split down the middle.

They started pulling out the girders.

It looked like the Ferris wheel all right.

Denise said, “My dad says somebody fell off last year in Atlantic City. They stood up.You ever stand up?”

Cheryl frowned.

“Of course not.”

Denise turned to me.

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“I bet you never did, did you?”

I ignored the tone. Denise always had to work so hard to be such a brat all the time.

“No,” I said.

“Why would I?”

“Cause it’s fun!” I She was grinning and she should have been pretty when she grinned. She had good white teeth and a lovely, delicate mouth. But something always went wrong with Denise’s smile. There was always something manic in it. Like she really wasn’t having much fun at all despite what she wanted you to think. It also disappeared too fast. It was unnerving. It did that now and she said so only I could hear, “I was thinking about The Game before.” She looked straight at me very wide-eyed and serious like there was something more to come, something important.

I waited. I thought maybe she expected me to answer. I didn’t. Instead, I looked away toward the truck.

The Game, I thought. Great.

I didn’t like to think about The Game. But as long as Denise and some of the others were around I supposed I’d have to.

It started early last summer. A bunch of us—me, Donny, Willie, Woofer, Eddie, Tony and Lou Morino, and finally, later, Denise—used to meet back by the apple orchard to play what we called Commando. We played it so often that soon it was just “The Game.”

I have no idea who came up with it. Maybe Eddie or the Morinos. It just seemed

to happen to us one day and from then on it was just there.

In The Game one guy was “it”. He was the Commando. His “safe” territory was the orchard. The rest of us were a platoon of soldiers bivouacked a few yards away up on a hill near the brook where, as smaller kids, we’d once played King of the Mountain.

We were an odd bunch of soldiers in that we had no weapons. We’d lost them, I guess, during some battle. Instead it was the Commando who had the weapons—apples from the orchard, as many as he could carry.

In theory he also had the advantage of surprise. Once he was ready he’d sneak from the orchard through the brush and raid our camp. With luck he could bop at least one of us with an apple before being seen. The apples were bombs. If you got hit with an apple you were dead, you were out of the game. So the object was to hit as many guys as you could before getting caught.

You always got caught.

That was the point.

The Commando never won.

You got caught because, for one thing, everybody else was sitting on a fairly good-sized hill watching and waiting for you, and unless the grass was very high and you were very lucky, you had to get seen. So much for the element of surprise. Second, it was seven against one, and you had just the single “safe” base back at the orchard yards away. So here you were firing wildly over your shoulder running like crazy back to your base with a bunch of kids like a pack of u 49 d dogs at your heels, and maybe you’d get one or two or three of them but eventually they’d get you.

And as I say, that was the point.

Because the captured Commando got tied to a tree in the grove, arms tied behind his back, legs hitched together.

He was gagged. He was blindfolded.

And the survivors could do anything they wanted to him while the others—even

the “dead” guys—looked on.

Sometimes we all went easy and sometimes not.

The raid took maybe half an hour.

The capture could take all day.

At the very least, it was scary.

Eddie, of course, got away with murder. Half the time you were afraid to capture him. He could turn on you, break the rules, and The Game would become a bloody, violent free for-all. Or if you did catch him there was always the problem of how to let him go. If you'd done anything to him he didn't like it was like setting free a swarm of bees.

Yet it was Eddie who introduced his sister.

And once Denise was part of it the complexion of The Game changed completely.

Not at first. At first it was the same as always. I Everybody took turns and you got yours and I got mine except there was this girl there.

But then we started pretending we had to be nice to her. Instead of taking turns we'd let her be whatever she wanted to be. Troops or Commando. Because she was new to The Game, because she was a girl.

And she started pretending to have this obsession with getting all of us before we got her. Like it was a challenge to her. Every day was finally going to be the day she won at Commando.

We knew it was impossible. She was a lousy shot for one.

Denise never won at Commando.

She was twelve years old. She had curly brown-red hair and her skin was lightly freckled all over.

She had the small beginnings of breasts, and thick pale prominent nipples.

I thought of all that now and fixed my eyes on the truck, on the workers and the girders.

But Denise wouldn't leave it alone.

"It's summer," she said.

"So how come we don't play?"

She knew damn well why we didn't play but she was right too in a way—what had stopped The Game was nothing more than that the weather had gotten too cold. That and the guilt of course.

"We're a little old for that now," I lied.

She shrugged.

"Uh-huh. Maybe. And maybe you guys are chicken."

"Could be. I've got an idea, though. Why don't you ask your brother if he's chicken."

She laughed.

"Yeah. Sure. Right."

The sky was growing darker.

"It's going to rain," said Cheryl.

The men certainly thought so. Along with the girders they were hauling out canvas tarps, spreading them out in the D 51 D

grass just in case. They were working fast, trying to get the big wheel assembled before the downpour. I recognized one of them from last summer, a wiry blond southerner named Billy Bob or Jimmy Bob something who had handed Eddie a cigarette he asked for. That alone made him memorable. Now he was hammering pieces of the wheel together with a large ball-peen hammer, laughing at something the fat man said beside him. The laugh was high and sharp, almost feminine. You could hear the ping of the hammer and the trucks' gears groaning

behind us, you could hear generators running and the grinding of machinery—and then a sudden staccato pop, rain falling hard into the field's dry hard-packed dirt.

“Here it comes!” I took my shirt out of my jeans and pulled it up over my head. Cheryl and Denise were already running for the trees. My house was closer than theirs. I didn't really mind the rain. But it was a good excuse to get out of there for a while. Away from Denise. I just couldn't believe she wanted to talk about The Game. You could see the rain wouldn't last. It was coming down too fast, too heavily. Maybe by the time it was over some of the other kids would be hanging around. I could lose her. I ran past them huddled beneath the trees. “Going home!” I said. Denise's hair was plastered down over her cheeks and forehead. She was smiling again.

Her shirt was soaked clear through.

I saw Cheryl reach out to me. That long bony wet arm dangling.

“Can we come?” she yelled. I pretended I didn't hear.

The rain was pretty loud over there in the leaves. I figured Cheryl would get over it. I kept running.

Denise and Eddie, I thought. Boy. What a pair.

If anybody is ever gonna get me into trouble it'll be them. One or the other or both of them. It's got to be.

Ruth was on the landing taking in the mail from her mailbox as I ran past her house. She turned in the doorway and smiled and waved to me, as water cascaded down the eaves.

a 53 d

I never learned what bad feeling had come between Ruth and my mother but something had when I was eight or nine.

Before that, long before Meg and Susan came along I used to sleep over nights with Donny and Willie and Woofer in the double set of bunk beds they had in their room.

Willie had a habit of leaping into bed at night so he'd destroyed a few bunks over the years. Willie was always flinging himself on something. When he was two or three, Ruth said, he'd destroyed his crib completely. The kitchen chairs were all unhinged from his sprawling. But the bunks they had in the bedroom now were tough. They'd survived.

Since whatever happened between Ruth and my mother I was allowed to stay there only infrequently.

But I remember those earlier nights when we were kids. We'd cut up laughing in the dark for an hour or two whispering, giggling, spitting over the sides at whoever was on the bottom bunks and then Ruth would come in and yell and we'd go to sleep.

The nights I liked best were Karnival nights. From the open bedroom window facing the playground we could hear calliope music, screams, the whir and grind of machinery.

The sky was orange-red as though a forest fire were raging, punctuated by brighter reds and blues as the Octopus whirled just out of sight behind the trees.

We knew what was out there—we had just come back from there after all, our hands still sticky from cotton candy.

But somehow it was mysterious to lie listening, long past our bedtime, silent for once, envying adults and teenagers, imagining the terrors and thrills of the big rides we were too young to go on that were getting all those screams. Until the sounds and lights slowly faded away, replaced by the laughter of strangers as they made their way back to cars all up and down our block. I swore that when I got older enough I'd be the last one to leave.

And now I was standing alone at the refreshment booth eating my third hot dog of the evening and wondering what the hell to do with myself.

I'd ridden all the rides I cared to. I'd lost money at every game and wheel of fortune the place had to offer and all I had was one tiny ceramic poodle for my mother shoved in my pocket to show for it.

I'd had my candy apple, my Sno-Cone and my slice of pizza.

I'd hung out with Kenny and Malcolm until Malcolm got sick on the Dive Bomber and then with Tony and Lou Merino and Linda and Betty Martin until they went home. It was fun, but now there was just me. It was ten o'clock.

And two hours yet to go.

I'd seen Woofer earlier. But Donny and Willie Jr.

hadn't shown and neither had Ruth or Meg or Susan. It was odd because Ruth was usually very big on Karnival. I thought of going across the street to see what was what but that would mean admitting I was bored and I wasn't ready to do that yet.

I decided I'd wait a while.

Ten minutes later Meg arrived.

I was trying my luck on number seven red and considering a second candy apple when I saw her walk slowly through the crowd, alone, wearing jeans and a bright green blouse—and suddenly I didn't feel so shy anymore. That I didn't feel shy amazed me. Maybe by then I was ready for anything. I waited until I lost on the red again and went over.

And then it was as though I was interrupting something.

She was staring up at the Ferris wheel, fascinated, brushing back a lock of long red hair with her fingers. I saw something glint on her hand as it dropped to her side.

It was a pretty fast wheel. Up top the girls were squealing.

"Hi, Meg." I said.

She looked at me and smiled and said, "Hi, David."

Then she looked back at the wheel.

You could tell she'd never been on one before. Just the way she stared. What kind of life was that? I wondered.

“Neat, huh? It’s faster than most are.”

She looked at me again, all excited.

“It is?”

“Yeah. Faster than the one at Playland, anyway.

Faster than Bertram’s Island.”

“It’s beautiful.”

u 57 a

Privately I agreed with her. There was a smooth easy glide to the wheel I’d always liked, a simplicity of purpose and design that the scary rides lacked. I couldn’t have stated it then but I’d always thought the wheel was graceful, | romantic. I “Want to try?”³ j I heard the eagerness in my voice and wished for i death. What was I doing? The girl was older than me. Maybe | as much as three years older. I was crazy, j I tried to backtrack. || Maybe I’d confuse her.

“I

“I mean, I’d go on it with you if you want. If you’re scared to. I don’t mind.”³ She laughed. I felt the knife-point lift away from my throat.

“Come on,” she said.

She took my hand and led me over.

Somehow I bought us tickets and we stepped into a car and sat down. All I remember is the feel of her hand, warm and dry in the cool night air, the fingers slim and strong.

That and my bright-red cheeks reminding me I was twelve years old on the wheel with something very much like a fullgrown woman. I And then the old problem came up of what to say, while they loaded the rest of the cars and we rose to the top. I solved it by saying nothing. That seemed fine with her. She didn’t seem uncomfortable at all. Just relaxed and content to be up here looking down at the people and the whole Karnival spread around her strung with lights and up

over the trees to our houses, rocking the car gently back and forth, smiling, humming a tune I didn't know.

Then the wheel began turning and she laughed and I thought it was the happiest, nicest sound I'd ever heard and felt proud of myself for asking her, for making her happy and making her laugh the way she did.

As I say the wheel was fast and up at the top almost completely silent, all the noise of the Karnival held down below as though enveloped there, and you plunged down into it and then back out of it again, the noise receding quickly, and at the top you were almost weightless in the cool breeze so that you wanted to hold on to the crossbar for a moment for fear of flying away entirely.

I looked down to her hands on the bar and that was when I saw the ring. In the moonlight it looked thin and pale.

It sparkled.

I made a show of enjoying the view but mostly it was her smile and the excitement in her eyes I was enjoying, the way the wind pressed and fluttered the blouse across her breasts.

Then our ride was at its peak and the wheel turned faster, the airy sweeping glide at its most graceful and elegant and thrilling as I looked at her, her lovely open face rushing first through a frame of stars and then past the dark schoolhouse and then the pale brown tents of the Kiwanis, her hair blowing back and then forward over her flushed cheeks as we rose again, and I suddenly felt those first two or three years that she had lived and I hadn't like a terrible weighted irony, like a curse, and thought for a moment, it isn't fair. I An give her this but that's all and it's just not fair.

11 59 ü

The feeling passed. By the time the ride was over and we waited near the top all that was left was the pleasure at how happy she looked. And how alive.

I could talk now.

"How'd you like it?"| "God, I loved it! You keep treating me to things, David."

“I can’t believe you never rode before.”

“ ”My parents... I know they always meant to take us someplace. Palisades Park or somewhere. We just never got around to it, I guess.“

“I heard about... everything. I’m sorry.”

There. It was out.

She nodded.

“The worst is missing them, you know?”

And knowing they won’t be back again. Just knowing that.

Sometimes you forget and it’s as though they’re on vacation or something and you think, gee, I wish they’d call. You miss them. You forget they’re really gone. You forget the past six months even happened. Isn’t that weird? Isn’t that crazy?

Then you catch yourself... and it’s real again.

“I dream about them a lot. And they’re always still alive in my dreams. We’re happy.”:i I could see the tears well up. She smiled and shook her head.

“Don’t get me started,” she said.⁹ We were on the downside now, moving, only five or six cars ahead of us. I saw the next group waiting to get on. I looked down over the bar and noticed Meg’s ring again. She saw me looking.

n 60

“My mother’s wedding band,” she said.

“Ruth doesn’t like me to wear it much but my mother would have. I’m not going to lose it. I’d never lose it.”

“It’s pretty. It’s beautiful.”

She smiled.

“Better than my scars?”

I flushed but that was okay, she was only kidding me.

“A lot better.”

The wheel moved down again. Only two more cars to go. Time moved dreamlike for me, but even at that it moved too quickly. I hated to see it end.

“How do you like it?” I asked.

“Over at the Chandler’s?”

/ She shrugged.

“Okay I guess. Not like home. Not the way it was. Ruth’s kind of... funny sometimes. But I think she means well.” She paused and then said, “Woofers a little weird.”

“You can say that again.”

We laughed. Though the comment about Ruth confused me. I remembered the reserve in her voice, the coldness that first day by the brook.

“We’ll see,” she said.

“I suppose it takes time to get used to things, doesn’t it.”

We’d reached the bottom now. One of the carnies lifted the crossbar and held the car steady with his foot. I hardly noticed him. We stepped out.

“I’ll tell you one thing I don’t like,” she said.

She said it almost in a whisper, like maybe she expected somebody to hear and then report to someone else—and as though we were confidants, equals, coconspirators.

u 61 ü

I liked that a lot. I leaned in close.

“What?” I said.

“That basement,” she said.

“I don’t like that at ;

That shelter.“

knew what she meant.

In his day Willie Chandler Sr.had been very handy.

Handy and a little paranoid.

So that I guess when Khrushchev told the United Nations, “We will bury you,” Willie Sr.must have said something like the fuck you will and built himself a bomb shelter in the basement.

It was a room within a room, eight by ten feet wide and six feet high, modeled strictly according to government specifications.You went down the stairs from their kitchen, walked past the paint cans stacked beneath the stairs and the sink and then the washer and dryer, turned a corner and walked through a heavy metal bolted door—originally the door to a meat locker—and you were inside a concrete enclosure at least ten degrees colder than the rest of the place, musty-smelling and dark.

There were no electrical outlets and no light fixture.

Willie had nailed girders to the kitchen floor beams and supported them with thick wooden posts.He had sandbagged the only window on the outside of the house and covered the inside with heavy half-inch wire-mesh screening.

He had provided the requisite fire extinguisher, batteryoperated radio, ax, crowbar, battery lantern, first-aid kit and [i 63 ü

bottles of water.Cartons of canned food lay stacked on a small heavy handmade hardwood table along with a Sterno stove, a travel alarm clock and an air pump for blowing up the mattresses rolled in the corner.

All this built and purchased on a milkman’s salary.

He even had a pick and shovel there, for digging out J after the blast. | j

1| The one thing Willie omitted and that the government recommended was a chemical toilet.

They were expensive. And he'd left before getting around to that.

Now the place was sort of ratty-looking—food supplies raided for Ruth's cooking, the extinguisher fallen off its wall mount, batteries dead in the radio and lantern, and the items themselves filthy from three solid years of grim neglect. The shelter reminded Ruth of Willie. She was not going to clean it.

We played there sometimes, but not often.

The place was scary.

It was as though he'd built a cell there—not a shelter to keep something out but a dark black hole to keep something in.

And in a way its central location informed the whole cellar. You'd be down there drinking a Coke talking with Ruth while she did her laundry and you'd look over your shoulder and see this evil-looking bunker sort of thing, this squat concrete wall, constantly sweating, dripping, cracked in places. As though the wall itself were old and sick and dying.

We'd go in there occasionally and scare each other.

That was what it was good for. Scaring each other.

And nothing much else.

We used it sparingly.

I tell you, what's missing from that goddamn Karnival's a good old-fashioned hootchiekoo!"

It was Tuesday night, the second night of Karnival and Ruth was watching Cheyenne Bodie get deputized for the umpteenth time and the town's chickenshit mayor pinning the deputy's badge to his fringed cowhide shirt. Cheyenne looked proud and determined.

Ruth held a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other and sat low and tired-

looking in the big overstuffed chair by the fireplace, her long legs stretched out on the hassock, barefoot.

Woofers glanced up at her from the floor.

“What’s a hootchiekoo?”

“Hootchie-koo.Hootchie-kootchie.Dancin’ girls, Ralphie.That and the freak show.When I was your age we had both.I saw a man with three arms once.”

Willie Jr.looked at her.

“Nah,” he said.

But you could see she had him going.

“Don’t contradict your mother.I did.I saw a man with three arms—one of ‘em just a little bitty thing coming out of here.”

She raised her arm and pointed to her armpit neatly shaved and smooth inside the dress.

“The other two were normal just like yours.I saw a two-headed cow as well, same show.

“Course that was dead.”| We sat around the Zenith in an irregular circle, Woofers on the carpet next to Ruth, me and Willie and Donny on the couch, and Eddie squatting directly in front of the television so that Woofers had to shift to see around him.

Times like this you didn’t have to worry about Eddie.

In his house they didn’t have television.He was glued to it.

And if anybody could control him Ruth could.

“What else?”asked Willie Jr.

“What other stuff’d you see?”

He ran his hand over his blond flattop.He was always doing that.I guess he

enjoyed the feel of it though I couldn't see how he'd like the greasy waxed part up front.

"Mostly things in bottles. Stillborns. You know stillborns? In formaldehyde. Little shrunk things—goats, cats.

All kinds of stuff. That's going back a long time. I don't remember. I do remember a man must have weighed five, six hundred pounds, though. Took three other fellas to haul him up. Fattest damn thing I ever saw or ever want to see."] We laughed, picturing the three guys having to help him up.

We all knew Ruth was careful of her weight.* "I tell you, carnivals were something when I was a girl."

She sighed.

You could see her face go calm and dreamy-looking then the way it did sometimes when she was looking back-way back. Not to Willie but all the way back to her childhood. I always liked watching her then. I think we all did. The lines and angles seemed to soften and for somebody's mother, she was almost beautiful.

"Ready yet?" asked Woofer. It was a big thing for him tonight, being able to go out to the Karnival this late. He was eager to get going.

"Not yet. Finish your sodas. Let me finish my beer."

She took a long deep pull on the cigarette, holding the smoke in and then letting it out all in a rush.

The only other person I knew who smoked a cigarette as hard as Ruth did was Eddie's dad. She tilted the beer can and drank.

"I wanna know about this hootchie-koo," said Willie.

He leaned forward next to me on the couch, his shoulders turned inward, rounded.

As Willie got older and taller his slouch got more pronounced. Ruth said that if he kept on growing and slouching at this rate he was going to be a hunchback. A

six footer “Yeah,” said Woofer.

“What’s it supposed to be?I don’t get it.”

Ruth laughed.

“It’s dancing girls, I told you.Doncha know anything?Half naked too, some of them.”

She pulled the faded print dress back up to halfway over her thighs, held it there a moment, fluttered it at us, and then flapped it down again.

“Skirts up to here,” she said.

“And little teeny brassieres and that’s all.Maybe a ruby in the belly button or something.With little dark red circles painted here, and here.”She indicated her nipples, making slow circles with her fingers.Then she looked at us.

u 69 u

“What’d you think of than” I felt myself Hush.| Woofer laughed.

Willie and Donny were watching her intently.

Eddie remained fixed on Cheyenne Bodie.She laughed.

“Well, I guess nothing like that’s gonna be sponsored by the good old Kiwanis, though, is it?Not those boys.Hell, they’d like to.They’d love to!But they’ve all got wives.Damn hypocrites.”i Ruth was always going on about the Kiwanis or the Rotary or something.

She was not a joiner.

We were used to it.

She drained her beer and stubbed out the cigarette.

She got up.

“Finish your drinks, boys,” she said.

“Let’s go.Let’s get out of here.Meg?Meg Loughlin!”

She walked into the kitchen and dropped her empty beer can in the garbage pail.Down the hall the door to her room opened and Meg stepped out, looking a little wary at first, I thought—I guessed it was Ruth’s shouting.Then her eyes settled on me and she smiled, a So that was how they were working it, I thought.Meg and Susan were in Ruth’s old room.It was logical because that was the smaller of the two.But it also meant that either I Ruth was bunking on the convertible sofa or with Donny and J Woofer and Willie Jr.I wondered what my parents would say ; to that.

“I’m taking these boys out for a Mister Softee over at the fair? Meggie.You take care of your sister and keep yourself out of the icebox.Don’t want you getting fat on us.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ruth turned to me.

“David,” she said, “you know what you ought to do?

You ought to go say hi to Susan.You never met and it’s not polite.”

“Sure.Okay.”

Meg led the way down the hallway ahead of me.

Their door was to the left opposite the bathroom, the boys’ room straight on.I could hear soft radio music coming from behind the door.Tommy Edwards singing “It’s All In the Game.”Meg opened the door and we went inside.

When you’re twelve, little kids are little kids and that’s about it. You’re not even supposed to notice them, really.

They’re like bugs or birds or squirrels or somebody’s roving house cat—part of the landscape but so what.Unless of course it’s somebody like Woofer you can’t help but notice.

I’d have noticed Susan though.

I knew that the girl on the bed looking up at me from her copy of Screen Stories was nine years old—Meg had told me that—but she looked a whole lot younger. I was glad she had the covers up so I couldn't see the casts on her hips and legs. She seemed frail enough as it was without my having to think about all those broken bones. I was aware of her wrists, though, and the long thin fingers holding the magazine.

Is this what an accident does to you? I wondered.

l] 71

Except for the bright green eyes it was almost like meeting Meg's opposite. Where Meg was all health and strength and vitality, this one was a shadow. Her skin so pale under the reading lamp it looked translucent.

Donny'd said she still took pills every day for fever, antibiotics, and that she wasn't healing right, that walking was still pretty painful, a I thought of the Hans Christian Andersen story about the little mermaid whose legs had hurt her too. In the book I had the illustration even looked like Susan. The same long silky blond hair and soft delicate features, the same look of sad long-time vulnerability. Like someone cast ashore.

"You're David," she said.

I nodded and said hi.

The green eyes studied me. The eyes were intelligent.

Warm too. And now she seemed both younger and older than nine.

"Meg says you're nice," she said.

I smiled.

She looked at me a moment more and smiled back at me and then went back to the magazine. On the radio Alan Freed played the Elegants' "Little Star."

Meg stood watching from the doorway. I didn't know what to say.

I walked back down the hall. The others were waiting.

I could feel Ruth's eyes on me. I looked down at the carpet.

"There you go," she said.

"Now you know each other."

Two nights after Karnival a bunch of us slept out together.

The older guys on the block—Lou Morino, Glen Knoll, and Harry Gray—had been in the habit for years now of camping out on warm summer nights at the old water tower in the woods behind the Little League diamond with a couple of six-packs between them and cigarettes stolen from Murphy's store.

We were all still too young for that, with the water tower all the way over on the other side of town. But that hadn't stopped us from envying them aloud and frequently until finally our parents said it would be okay if we camped out too as long as it was under supervision—meaning, in somebody's backyard. So that was what we did.

I had a tent and Tony Morino had his brother Lou's when he wasn't using it so it was always my backyard or his.

Personally, I preferred my own. Tony's was all right—but what you wanted to do was to get back as far away from the house as possible in order to have the illusion of really being out there on your own and Tony's yard wasn't really suited to that. It tapered down over a hill with just some scrub and a field behind it. The scrub and field were boring and you were resting all night on an incline. Whereas I 75 ù my yard ran straight back into thick deep woods, spooky and dark at night with the shadows of elm, birch and maple trees and wild with sounds of crickets and frogs from the brook. It was flat and a lot more comfortable., v Not that we did much sleeping. At least that night we didn't. j| Since dusk we'd been lying there telling Sick Jokes and Shaddap Jokes ("Mommy, mommy! Billie just vomited into a pan on the stove!")

"Shaddap and eat your stew."), the six of us laughing, crunched into a tent that was built for four—me, Donny, Willie, Tony Morino, Kenny Robertson and Eddie.

Woofers were being punished for playing with their plastic soldiers in the wire-mesh incinerator in the yard again—otherwise he might have whined long enough and

loud enough to make us take him too. But Woofer had this habit.

He'd hang his knights and soldiers from the mesh of the incinerator and watch their arms and legs burn slowly along with the trash, imagining God knows what, the plastic fire dripping, the soldiers curling, the black smoke pluming up. Ruth hated it when he did that. The toys were expensive and they made a mess all over her incinerator. There wasn't any beer but we had canteens and Thermoses full of Kool-Aid so that was all right. Eddie had half a pack of his father's Kool unfiltered and we'd close the J tent flaps and pass one around now and then. We'd wave away the smoke. Then we'd open the flaps again just in case my mom came out to check on us—though she never did. Donny rolled over beside me and you could hear a Tasty-Cake wrapper crush beneath his bulk.

d 76 a

That evening when the truck came by we'd all gone out to the street to stock up.

Now, no matter who moved, something crackled.

Donny had a joke.

"So this kid's in school, right? He's just a little kid, sitting at his desk and this nice old lady schoolteacher looks at him and notices he looks real sad and says, what's wrong? And he says, waaa! I didn't get no breakfast! You poor little guy, says the teacher. Well, don't worry, no big deal, she says, it's almost lunchtime. You'll get something to eat then, right? So now let's return to our geography lessons. Where's the Italian border?"

"In bed, fucking my mother, says the little kid. That's how come I didn't get no fucking breakfast!"

We laughed.

"I heard that one," said Eddie.

"Or maybe I read it in Playboy" "Sure," said Willie. Willie was on the other side of me over against the tent. I could smell his hair wax and, occasionally and unpleasantly, his bad teeth.

"Sure," he said, "you read it in Playboy. Like I fucked Debra Paget. Right."

Eddie shrugged. It was dangerous to contradict him but Donny was lying between them and Donny outweighed him by fifteen pounds.

“My old man buys it,” he said.

“Buys it every month.

So I hock it off him outa his drawer, read the jokes, check the broads, and put it back again. He never knows. No sweat.”

“You better hope he never knows,” said Tony.

Eddie looked at him. Tony lived across the street from him and we all knew that Tony knew that Eddie’s dad beat him.

u 77 u

“I like the scene in the soda shop,” said Kenny.

“Where he sings and beats the shit outa the guy.”

“Great,” said Eddie.

“Really great,” said Willie. | “Really.” “Anyway, you got to figure Playboy’s not just a magazine, either,” said Donny.

“You know, it’s Playboy. I mean, Marilyn Monroe was in there. It’s the greatest magazine ever.” H “You think? Better than Mad?” Kenny sounded skeptical.

“Shit, yes. I mean, Mod’s casual. But it’s just for kids, you know?”

“What about Famous Monsters’!” asked Tony.

That was a tough one. Famous Monsters had just appeared and all of us were crazy for it.

“Sure,” said Donny. He took a drag on the cigarette and smiled. The smile was all knowing.

“Does Famous Monsters of Filmland show tits?” he said.

We all laughed. The logic was irrefutable.

He passed the smoke to Eddie, who took a final drag and stubbed it out on the grass, then flipped the butt into the woods.

There was one of those silences where nobody had anything to say, we were all off alone there somewhere.

Then Kenny looked at Donny.

“You ever really see it?” he said.

“See what?”

“Tit.”

“Real tit?”

“Yeah.”

Donny laughed.

“Eddie’s sister.”

That got another laugh because everybody had.

“I mean on a woman.”

“Nah.”

“Anybody?” He looked around.

“My mother,” said Tony. You could tell he was shy about it.

“I walked in one time, into her bathroom, and she was putting her bra on. For a minute I saw.”

“A minute?” Kenny was really into this.

“No. A second.”

“Jeez.What was it like?”

“What do you mean what was it like?It was my mother, for chrissake! Madonn‘!You little pervert.”

“Hey, no offense, man.”

“Yeah.Okay.None taken.”

But all of us were thinking of Mrs.Morino now.She was a thick-wasted, short-legged Sicilian woman with a lot more mustache than Tony had but her breasts were pretty big.It was at once difficult and interesting and slightly repulsive to try to picture her that way.

“I’ll bet Meg’s are nice,” said Willie.

It just hung there for a moment.But I doubt that any of us were thinking about Mrs.Morino anymore.

Donny looked at his brother.

“Meg’s?”

“Yeah.”

You could see the wheels turning.But Willie acted as though Donny hadn’t understood.Trying to score points on him.f “Our cousin, dope.Meg.”

Donny just looked at him. Then he said, “Hey, what time’s it?”

Kenny had a watch.

“Quarter to eleven.”

“Great!”

And suddenly he was crawling out of the tent, and then he was standing there.Peering in, grinning.

“Come on!I got an idea!”

From my house to his all you had to do was cross the yard and go through a line of hedges and you were right behind their garage. I There was a light on in the Chandlers' bathroom | window and one in the kitchen and one in Meg and Susan's ||fl bedroom. By now we knew what he had in mind. I wasn't sure I liked it but I wasn't sure I didn't, either.

Obviously, it was exciting. We weren't supposed to leave the tent. If we got caught that would be the end of sleeping out and plenty of other stuff as well.

On the other hand, if we didn't get caught it was better than camping at the water tower. It was better than beer.

Once you got into the mood of the thing, it was actually kind of hard to restrain yourself from giggling.

"No ladder," whispered Eddie.

"How we gonna do this?"

Donny looked around.

"The birch tree," he said.

He was right. Off to the left of the yard, about fifteen feet from the house was a tall white birch bent badly by winter storms. It drooped halfway down to the scruffy grass over what was nearly the middle of the lawn.

"We can't all climb it," said Tony.

"It'll break."

"So we'll take turns. Two at a time. Ten minntes each and the best man wins."

"Okay. Who's first?"

"Hell, it's our tree." Donny grinned.

"Me and Willie're first."

I felt a little pissed at him for that. We were supposed to be best friends. But then I figured what the hell, Willie was his brother.

He sprinted across the lawn and Willie followed.

The tree forked out into two strong branches. They could lie there side by side. They had a good straight view into the bedroom and a fair one into the bathroom.

Willie kept changing position though, trying to get comfortable. It was easy to see how out of shape he was. He was awkward just handling his own weight. Whereas, for all his bulk, Donny looked like he was born in trees.

We watched them watching. We watched the house, the kitchen window, looking for Ruth, hoping not to see her.

“Me and Tony next,” said Eddie.

“What’s the time?”

Kenny squinted at his watch.

“Five minutes more.”

“Shit,” said Eddie. He pulled out the pack of Kools and lit one.

“Hey!” whispered Kenny.

“They might see!”

“You might be stupid,” said Eddie.

“You cup it under your hand. Like this. Nobody sees.”

I was trying to make out Donny’s and Willie’s faces, wondering if anything was going on inside. It was hard to see but I didn’t think so. They just lay there like a pair of large dark tumorous growths.

I wondered if the tree would ever recover.

I hadn’t been aware of the frogs or crickets but now I was, a percussive drone in the silence. All you could hear was them and Eddie pulling hard on the cigarette and exhaling and the occasional creak of the birch tree. There were fireflies in the yard blinking on and off, drifting, j “Time,” said Kenny. j Eddie dropped the

Kool and crushed it and then he and Tony ran over to the tree. A moment later they were up and Willie and Donny were down, back with us.

The tree rested higher now.

“See anything?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Willie said. It was surprising how angry he sounded. As though it were Meg’s fault for not showing. As though she’d cheated him. But then Willie always was an asshole.

I looked at Donny. The light wasn’t good back there but it seemed to me he had that same intent, studied look as when he’d been looking at Ruth talking about the hootchiekoo girls and what they wore and didn’t wear. It was as though he were trying to figure something out and was a little depressed because he couldn’t get the answer.

We stood together silently and then in a while Kenny tapped me on the shoulder.

“Time,” he said.

We ran over to the tree and I slapped Tony’s ankle. He slid down.

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We stood there waiting for Eddie. I looked at Tony. He shrugged and shook his head, staring at the ground. Nothing.

A few minutes later Eddie gave up too and slid down next to me.

“This is bullshit,” he said.

“Screw it. Screw her.”

And they walked away.

I didn’t get it. Eddie was mad now too.

I didn’t let it worry me.

We went up. The climb was easy.

At the top I felt this great rush of excitement. I wanted to laugh out loud I felt so good. Something was going to happen. I knew it. Too bad for Eddie and Donny and Willie—it was going to be us. She'd be at the window any moment now and we'd see.

It didn't bother me at all that I was probably betraying Meg by spying on her. I hardly even thought of her as Meg. It was as though it wasn't really her that we were looking for. It was something more abstract than that. A real live girl and not some black-and-white photo in a magazine. A woman's body.

I was finally going to learn something.

What you had was a case of greater priority.

We settled in.

I glanced at Kenny. He was grinning.

It occurred to me to wonder why the other guys had acted so pissy.

This was fun! Even the fact that you were scared was fun. Scared that Ruth would appear suddenly on the porch, telling us to get our asses out of there. Scared that Meg would look out the bathroom window straight into your eyes.

I waited, confident.

The bathroom light went off but that didn't matter. It was the bedroom I was focused on. That's where I'd see her.

Straight-on. Naked. Flesh and blood, and someone I actually even knew a bit slightly.

I refused to even blink. I could feel a tingling down below where I pressed against the tree. A tune kept running around and around in my head—"Get out in that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans... I believe to m'soul you're the devil in nylon hose..." And so on.

Wild, I thought. I'm lying here in this tree. She's in there.

I waited.

The bedroom light went out.

Suddenly the house went dark.

I could have smashed something.

I could have torn that house to bits.

And now I knew exactly how the others had felt and exactly why they'd looked so mad at her, mad at Meg—because it felt like it was her fault, as though she was the one who'd got us up here in the first place and promised so much and then delivered nothing. And while I knew this was irrational and dumb of me that was exactly how I felt all the same.

Bitch, I thought.

And then I did feel guilty. Because that was personal.

That was about Meg.

And then I felt depressed.

It was as though part of me knew—didn't want to believe it or even think about it but knew all along.

I was never going to get that lucky. It had been bullshit from the beginning.

Just like Eddie said.

And somehow the reason for that was all wrapped up with Meg and with girls and women in general, even with Ruth and my mother somehow.

It was too big for me to grasp entirely so I suppose my mind just let it slide.

What remained was depression and a dull ache.

“Come on,” I said to Kenny. He was staring at the house, still not believing it, like he was expecting the lights to come right back on again. But he knew too. He looked at me and I could tell he knew.

All of us did.

We trooped back silently to the tent.

Inside it was Willie Jr.“finally, who put the canteen down and spoke.

He said, “Maybe we could get her into The Game.”

We thought about that.

And the night wound down from there.

I was in my yard trying to get the big red power mower going and sweating straight through my T-Shirt already because the damn thing was worse than a motorboat to start, when I heard Ruth shout in a kind of voice I don’t think I’d ever heard her use before—really furious.

“Jesus Christ!”

} I dropped the cord and looked up.

It was the kind of voice my mother had been known to use when she got unhinged, which wasn’t often, despite the open warfare with my father. It meant you ran for cover. But when Ruth got mad it was usually at Woofer and all she had to do then was look at him, her lips pressed tight together, her eyes narrowed down to small glittery stones, in order to shut him up or make him stop whatever he was doing. The look was completely intimidating. We used to imitate it and laugh, Donny and Willie and I—but when Ruth was the one wearing it it was no laughing matter.

I was glad for an excuse to stop struggling with the mower so I walked around the side of our garage where you could see over into their backyard.

Ruth’s wash was blowing on the clothesline. She was standing on the porch, her hands on her hips, and even if you n 89 hadn’t heard the voice or what she said you could tell she was really mad.

“You stupid shit!” was what she said.

And I can tell you, that shocked me.

Sure, Ruth cursed like a sailor. That was one of the reasons we liked her. Her

husband Willie Sr.“

“that lovely Irish bastard” or “that idiot mick sonovabitch” and John Lentz, the town’s mayor—and, we suspect, Ruth’s onetime suitor—got blasted regularly, a Everybody got some now and then.

But the thing is it was always casual swearing, pretty much without real anger. It was meant to get a laugh at some poor guy’s expense, and usually did.

It was just Ruth’s way of describing people.

It was pretty much like our own. Our friends were all retards, scumbags, lard asses or shit-for-brains. Their mothers all ate the flies off dead camels.

This was wholly different. Shit was what she said, and

I.“

shit was what she meant.

I wondered what Meg had done. a

I looked up to my own porch where the back screen door was open, hoping my mother wasn’t in the kitchen, that she hadn’t heard her. My mother didn’t approve of Ruth and I got enough grief already for spending as much time over there as I did. a I was in luck. She wasn’t around. | I looked at Ruth. She hadn’t said anything else and she didn’t need to. Her expression said it all.

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I felt kind of funny, like I was spying again, twice in two days. But of course that was exactly what I had to do. I wasn’t about to allow her to see me watching her, exposed the way she was. It was too embarrassing. I pressed up close to the garage and peered around at her, hoping she wouldn’t look over my way for any reason. And she didn’t.

Their own garage blocked my view, though, so I couldn’t see what the problem was. I kept waiting for Meg to show up, to see how she was taking being called a stupid shit.

And then I got another surprise.

Because it wasn't Meg.

It was Susan.

I guessed she'd been trying to help with the laundry.

But it had rained last night, and it looked as though she'd dropped some of Ruth's whites on the muddy, scruffy excuse for a lawn they had because you could see the dirt stains on what she carried, a sheet or maybe a couple of pillowcases.

She was crying, really crying hard so that her whole body was shaking as she walked back toward Ruth standing rigid on the landing.

It was pathetic—this little tiny girl moving slowly along with braces on her legs and braces on her arms trying to manage just this one small pile of whites tucked under her arm that she probably shouldn't have had in the first place. I felt bad for her.

And finally, so did Ruth I guess.

Because she stepped down off the landing and took the stuff away from her and hesitated, watching her a moment as she sobbed and shook and stared down into the dirt. And then slowly you could see the tension go out of her as she raised her hand and rested it lightly, tentatively at first on Susan's shoulder, then turned and walked back to the house.

And at the very last moment just as they reached the top of the stairs Ruth looked in my direction so that I had to throw myself back fast and hard against the garage.

But all the same I'd swear to what I saw before that.

It's become a little important to me, actually, in retrospect. I try to figure it out.

Ruth's face looked very tired. Like the burst of anger was so strong it had drained her. Or maybe what I was seeing was just a little piece of something—something bigger—something that had been going on unnoticed by me for quite a while

now and this was just like a kind of crescendo on a long-playing record.

But the other thing I saw was what strikes me to this day, what puzzles me. Even at the time it made me wonder.* Just before I threw myself back, as Ruth turned looking skinny and tired with her hand on Susan's shoulder.

In just that instant as she turned, j I'd swear that she was crying too.|

) And my question is, for whom?|

The next thing was the tent worms.

It seemed to happen practically overnight. One day the trees were clean and normal and the next day they were hung with these heavy white sacks of webbing. In the bottom of the sacks you could see something vaguely dark and unhealthy-looking and if you looked closely enough you could see them moving.

"We'll burn 'em out," said Ruth.

We were standing in her yard near the birch tree, Woofer, Donny and Willie, Meg and I, and Ruth, who had on her old blue housedress with the deep pockets. It was ten o'clock in the morning and Meg had just finished her chores.

There was a little smudge of dirt beneath her left eye.

"You boys gather up some sticks," she said.

"Long ones, thick. And be sure to cut them green so they won't burn. Meg, get the rag bag out of the basement."

She stood squinting into the morning sunlight, surveying the damage. Virtually half the trees in their yard including the birch were already strung with sacks, some just the size of baseballs but others wide and deep as a shopping bag. The woods was full of them.

"Little bastards. They'll strip these trees in no time."

Meg went into the house and the rest of us headed for the woods to find some sticks. Donny had his hatchet so we u 93 D

cut some saplings and stripped them and cut them roughly in half. It didn't take long. When we came back Ruth and Meg were in the garage soaking the rags in kerosene. We wrapped them over the saplings and Ruth tied them off with clothesline and then we soaked them again, < She handed one to each of us. "I'll show you how it goes," she said.

"Then you can do it by yourselves. Just don't set the goddamn woods on fire."

ü It felt incredibly adult, i Ruth trusting us with fire, with torches.

My mother never would have.

We followed her into the yard looking, I guess, like a bunch of peasants heading out after Frankenstein's monster, our unlit torches aloft. But we didn't act so adult—we acted like we were going to a party—all of us silty and excited except Meg, who was taking it very seriously. Willie got Woofer in a headlock and ground his knuckles into his crewcut, a wrestling move we'd picked up from three hundred-pound Haystacks Calhoun, famous for the Big Splash. Donny and I marched side by side behind them, pumping our torches like a couple of drum majors with batons, giggling like fools. Ruth didn't seem to mind. "When we got to the birch tree Ruth dug into her pocket and pulled out a book of safety matches.

The nest on the birch tree was a big one.

"I'll do this one," said Ruth.

"You watch."

She lit the torch and held it a moment until the fire burned down and it was safe to use. It was still a pretty good il 94 u blaze, though.

"Be careful," she said.

"You don't want to burn the tree."

She held it six inches or so below the sack.

The sack began to melt.

It didn't burn. It melted the way Styrofoam melts, fading, receding back. It was thick and multilayered but it went fast.

And suddenly all these writhing, wriggling bodies were tumbling out, fat black furry worms—smoking, crackling.

You could almost hear them scream.

There must have been hundreds in just that one nest.

A layer of the sack would burn through to expose another layer and there were more in there. They just kept coming, falling to our feet like a black rain.

Then Ruth hit the mother lode.

It was as though a clot of living tar the size of a softball spilled out directly onto the torch, splitting apart as it fell.

The torch sputtered there were so many of them and almost seemed to go out for a moment. Then it flared again and those that had clung to it burned and fell.

“Jesus shit!” said Woofer.

Ruth looked at him.

“Sorry,” he said. But his eyes were wide.

You had to admit it was incredible. I'd never seen such slaughter. The ants on the porch were nothing to this. Ants were tiny, insignificant. When you tossed the boiling water on them they just curled and died. Whereas some of these were an inch long. They twisted and writhed—they seemed to want to live. I looked at the ground. There were worms all over the place. Most of them were dead, but a lot of them weren't, and those that weren't were trying to crawl away. H “What about these guys?” I asked her. | “Forget them,” she said.

“They'll just die. Or the birds will get them.” She laughed.

“We opened the oven before they were ready. Not quite baked yet.”

“They're sure baked now,” said Willie.

“We could get a rock,” said Woofer.

“Crush ‘em!”

“Listen to me when I talk. Forget them,” said Ruth.

She reached into her pocket again.

“Here.” She started handing us each books of matches.

“Remember. I want a yard left when you’re through.

And no going back into the woods. The woods can take care of itself.”

We took them from her. All but Meg.

“I don’t want them,” she said.

“What?”

She held out the matches. / J “I... I don’t want them. I’ll just go finish the laundry okay? This is... kind of...” j She looked down at the ground, at the black worms curled there, at the live ones crawling. Her face was pale.

“What?” said Ruth.

“Disgusting

You offended, honey?”

“No. I just don’t want...”

Ruth laughed.

“I’ll be damned. Look here boys,” she said.

“I’ll be damned.”

She was still smiling, but her face had gone really hard all of a sudden. It startled me and made me think of the other day with Susan. It was as though she’d been on some sort of hair trigger all morning with Meg and we simply hadn’t noticed

it. We'd been too busy, too excited.

"Look here," she said.

"What we've got here is a lesson in femininity." She stepped up close.

"Meg's squeamish. You understand how girls get squeamish, don't you boys? Ladies do. And Meg here is a lady. Why sure she is!"

She dropped the heavy sarcasm then and you could see the naked anger there.

"So what in the name of Jesus Christ do you suppose that makes me, Meggy? You suppose I'm not a lady? You figure ladies can't do what's necessary? Can't get rid of the goddamn pests in their goddamn garden?"

Meg looked confused. It came so fast you couldn't blame her.

"No, I..."

"You damn well better say no to me, honey! Because I don't need that kind of insinuation from any kid in a T-shirt can't even wipe her own face clean. You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She backed away a step.

And that seemed to cool Ruth down a little. She took a breath.

"Okay," she said.

"You go ahead downstairs. Go on, get back to your laundry. And call me when you're finished.

I'll have something else for you."

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned and Ruth smiled.

"My boys can handle it," she said.

“Can’t you, boys.”

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I nodded. At that moment I couldn’t speak. Nobody spoke. Her dismissal of Meg was so complete with authority and a strange sense of justice I was really a little in awe of her. Ij She patted Woofer’s head. -S I glanced at Meg. I saw her walk back to the house, head low, wiping at her face, looking for the smudge of dirt Ruth said was there, j Ruth draped her arm across my shoulder and turned toward the elm trees in the back. I inhaled the scent of her—soap and kerosene and cigarettes and clean fresh hair.

“My boys can do it,” she said to me. And her voice was very gentle again.

By one o’clock we’d torched every nest in the Chandlers’ yard, and Ruth had been right—the birds were having a field day now.

I stunk of kerosene.

I was starving and would have killed for a few White Castles just then. I settled for a bologna sandwich.

I went home.

I washed up in the kitchen and made one.

I could hear my mother in the living room ironing, humming along to the original cast album of The Music Man which she and my father had bussed to New York to see last year, just before the shit hit the fan about what I could only assume was my father’s latest affair. My father had plenty of opportunity for affairs and he took them. He was co-owner of a bar and restaurant called the Eagle’s Nest. He met them late and he met them early.

But I guess my mother had forgotten all that for the moment and was remembering the good times now with Professor Harold Hill and company.

I hated The Music Man.

I shut myself in my room awhile and flipped through my dog-eared copies of Macabre and Stranger Than Science but there was nothing in there that

interested me so I decided to go out again.

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I walked out the back and Meg was standing on the Chandlers' back porch shaking out the living-room throw rugs. She saw me and motioned me over. I felt a moment of awkwardness, of divided loyalty, I If Meg was on Ruth's shit list, there was probably some good reason for it.

On the other hand I still remembered that ride on the Fern's wheel and that morning by the Big Rock. j 'wi " She draped the rugs carefully over the iron railing and came down off the steps across the driveway to meet me. The smudge on her face was gone but she still wore the dirty yellow shirt and Donny's old rolled-up Bermudas. There was dust in her hair.

She took me by the arm and led me silently over to the side of her house, out of sight lines from the dining-room window. I "I don't get it," she said. You could see there was something troubling her, something she'd been working on.

"Why don't they like me, David?"

That wasn't what I'd expected.

"Who, the Chandlers?"

"Yes."

She just looked at me. She was serious.

“Sure they do.They like you.”

“No they don’t.I mean, I do everything I can to make them like me.I do more than my share of the work.I try to talk with them, get to know them, get them to know me, but they just don’t seem to want to. It’s like they want to not like me.Like it’s better that way.”

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It was embarrassing.It was friends she was talking about here.

“Look,” I said.

“So Ruth got mad at you.I don’t know why.Maybe she’s having a bad day.But nobody else got mad.Willie and Woofer and Donny didn’t get mad.”

She shook her head.

“You don’t understand.Willie and Woofer and Donny never get mad. It’s not that.Not with them.It’s just that they never seem to see me here, either.

Like I don’t exist.Like I don’t matter.I talk to them and they grunt and walk away.Or else when they do notice there’s something... not right about it.The way they look at me.

And Ruth...“

She’d started now and there was no stopping her.

“... Ruth hates me!Me and Susan both.You don’t see it.You think this was just one thing just this one time but it’s not.It’s all the time.I work all day for her some days and I just can’t please her, nothing’s right, nothing’s ever the way she’d do it.I know she thinks I’m stupid, lazy, ugly...”

“Ugly?”That, at least, was obviously ridiculous.

She nodded.

“I never thought I was before but now I don’t even know.David, you’ve known

these people all your life practically, right?”

“Yeah I have.”

“So why What did I do?I go to bed at night and it’s all I can think about.We were both real happy before.You know, before we came here I used to paint.Nothing very much, just a watercolor now and then.I don’t suppose I was ever too great at it.But my mother used to like them.And Susan used to like them, and my teachers.I’ve still got the paints and brushes but I just can’t start to do one anymore.

You know why?Because I know what Ruth would do, I know what she’d think.I know what she’d say.She’d just look at me and I’d know I was stupid and wasting my time to even try.“

I shook my head.That wasn’t the Ruth I knew.You could see Willie and Woofers and Donny acting strange around her—she was a girl, after all.But Ruth had always been good to us.Unlike the rest of the mothers on the block she always had plenty of time for us.Her door was always open.She handed us Cokes, sandwiches, cookies, the occasional beer.It didn’t make sense and I told her so.I “Come on. Ruth wouldn’t do that.Try it.Make her one.Make her a watercolor. I bet she’d love it.Maybe she’s just not used to having girls around, you know? Maybe it just takes time.Do it.Try one for her.”

She thought about it.

“I couldn’t,” she said.

“Honest.”i For a moment we just stood there.She was shaking.I knew that whatever this was all about, she wasn’t kidding.

I had an idea.

“How about me, then?You could make one for me.”

Without the idea in mind, without the plan, I’d never have had the nerve to ask her.But this was different.

She brightened a little.

“Would you really want one?”

“Sure I would.I’d like it a lot.”

She looked at me steadily until I had to turn away.

Then she smiled.

“Okay.I will, David.”

She seemed almost her usual self again.God!I liked it when she smiled.

Then I heard the back door open.

“MegV It was Ruth.

“I’d better go,” she said.

She took my hand and squeezed it.I could feel the stones in her mother’s wedding band.My face reddened.

“I’ll do it,” she said, and fled around the corner.

he must have got right on it too because the next day it rained all day into the evening and I sat in my room reading The Search for Bridey Murphy and listening to the radio until I thought I’d probably kill somebody if I heard that fucking Domenico Modugno sing “Volare” one more time.And then after dinner my mother and I were sitting in the living room watching television when Meg knocked at the back door.

My mother got up.I followed her and got myself a Pepsi out of the refrigerator.

Meg was smiling, wearing a yellow slicker, her hair dripping wet.

“I can’t come in,” she said.

“Nonsense,” said my mother.

“No, really,” she said.

“I just came over to give you this from Mrs.Chandler.”

She handed my mother a wet brown bag with a container of milk inside. Ruth and my mother didn't exactly socialize but they were still next-door neighbors and neighbors borrowed.

My mother accepted the bag and nodded.

"Tell Mrs.

Chandler thank you for me," she said.

"I will."

Then she dug down underneath the slicker and looked at me, and now she was really smiling.

"And this is for you," she said.

And handed me my painting.

It was wrapped with sheets of heavy opaque tracing paper taped together on both sides. You could see some of the lines and colors through it but not the shapes of things.

Before I could even say thanks or anything she said, "Bye," and waved and stepped back out into the rain and closed the door behind her. "Well," said my mother, and she was smiling too now.

"What have we here?" "I think it's a picture," I said.

I stood there, Pepsi in one hand and Meg's painting in the other. I knew what my mother was thinking.

What my mother was thinking had the word cute in it.

"Aren't you going to open it?"; "Yeah, sure. Okay." I put down the Pepsi and turned my back to her and began working on the tape. Then I lifted off the tracing paper.³ I could feel my mother looking over my shoulder but I really didn't care all of a sudden.⁴ "That's really good, my mother said, surprised.

"That's really very good. She's really quite something, isn't she."

And it was good. I was no art critic but you didn't have to be. She'd done the drawing in ink, and some of the lines were wide and bold and some were very delicate. The colors were pale washes—only the subtle suggestions of colors but very true and lifelike with a lot of the paper showing so it gave you the impression of a bright, sunny day.

It was a picture of a boy by a flowing brook, lying on his belly across a big flat rock and looking down into the water, with trees and sky all around.

I took it up to The Dog House to have it framed. The Dog House was a pet shop turned hobby shop. They had beagle pups in the front window and bows and arrows, Wham-O hula hoops, model kits and a frame shop in the back, with the fish, turtles, snakes and canaries in between.

The guy took a look and said, "Not bad."

"Can I have it tomorrow?"

"You see us going crazy here?" he said. The place was empty. The 2-Guys From Harrison chain store up on Route 10 was killing him.

"You can have it tonight. Come back 'round four-thirty."

I was there by a quarter after four, fifteen minutes early, but it was ready, a nice pine frame stained mahogany.

He wrapped it in brown paper.

It fit perfectly into one of the two rear baskets on my bike.

By the time I got home it was almost dinnertime so I had to wait through the pot roast and green beans and mashed potatoes with gravy. Then I had to take the garbage out.

Then I went over.

The television was blaring the theme from Father Knows Best, my least favorite TV show, and down the stairs for the billionth time came Kathy and Bud and Betty, beaming. I could smell the franks and beans and sauerkraut.

Ruth was in her chair with her feet up on the hassock. Donny and Willie sprawled together on the couch. Woofer lay on his belly so close to the TV set you had to wonder about his hearing. Susan sat watching from a straight-back chair in the dining room and Meg was out doing the dishes.

Susan smiled at me. Donny just waved and turned back to watch TV. | “Jeez,” I said.

“Don’t anybody get up or nothing.” f “Watcha got there, sport?” said Donny.] I held up the painting wrapped in brown paper.

“Those Mario Lanza records you wanted.”

He laughed.

“Creep.”

And now Ruth was looking at me.

I decided to jump right in.

I heard the water shut off in the kitchen. I turned and Meg was watching me, wiping her hands on her apron. I gave her a smile and my guess is she knew right away what I was doing, i “Ruth?” I “Yeah? Ralphie, turn the TV down. That’s it. What’s up, Davy?” I walked over to her. I glanced over my shoulder at Meg. She was coming toward me through the dining room.

She was shaking her head. Her mouth was forming a silent “no”.

That was okay. It was just shyness. Ruth would see the painting and she’d get over it.

“Ruth,” I said.

“This is from Meg.”

I held it out to her.

She smiled first at me and then at Meg and took it from me. Woofer had Father Knows Best turned low now so you could hear the crinkling of the stiff brown

paper as she unwrapped it. The paper fell away. She looked at the painting.

“Meg!” she said.

“Where’d you get the money to buy this?”

You could tell she admired it. I laughed.

“It costs just the framing,” I said.

“She painted it for you.”

“She did? Meg did?”

I nodded.

Donny, Woofer and Willie all crowded around to see.

Susan slipped off her chair.

“It’s beautiful!” she said.

I glanced at Meg again still standing anxious and hopeful looking in the dining room.

Ruth stared at the painting. It seemed like she stared a long time.

Then she said, “No, she didn’t. Not for me. Don’t kid me. She painted it for you, Davy.”

She smiled. The smile was a little funny somehow. And now I was getting anxious too.

“Look here. A boy on a rock. Of course it’s for you.”

She handed it back to me.

“I don’t want it,” she said.

I felt confused. That Ruth might refuse it had never even occurred to me. For a moment I didn’t know what to do.

I stood there holding it, looking down at it. It was a beautiful painting.

I tried to explain.

“But it’s really meant for you, Ruth. Honest. See, we talked about it. And Meg wanted to do one for you but she was so...”

“David” It was Meg, stopping me. And now I was even more confused, because her voice was stern with warning.

It made me almost angry. Here I was in the middle of this damn thing and Meg wouldn’t let me get myself out of it.

Ruth just smiled again. Then looked at Willie and Woofer and Donny.

“Take a lesson, boys. Remember this. It’s important.

All you got to do any time is be nice to a woman—and she’ll do all kinds of good things for you. Now Davy was nice to Meg and got himself a painting. Nice painting. That is what you got, isn’t it, Davy? I mean that’s all you got? I know you’re a little young but you never know.” I laughed, blushing.

“Come on, Ruth.”* “Well, I’m telling you you do never know. Girls are plain easy. That’s their problem. Promise ‘em a little something and you can have whatever you want half the time.

I know what I’m saying. Look at your father. Look at Willie Sr. He was gonna own his own company when we married.

Fleet of milk trucks. Start with one and work his way on up. I was gonna help him with the books just like I did back on Howard Avenue during the war. Ran that plant during the war. We were gonna be richer than my folks were when I was a kid in Morristown, and that was pretty rich, I’ll tell you.

But you know what I got? Nothing. Not a damned thing. Just you three poppin’ out one, two, three, and that lovely Irish bastard’s off to God knows where. So I get three hungry mouths to feed, and now I’ve got two more.

“I tell you, girls are dumb. Girls are easy. Suckers straight on down the line.”

She walked past me to Meg. She put her arm around her shoulders and then she turned to the rest of us.

“You take this painting now,” she said.

“I know you made it for David here and don’t you try to tell me any different. But what I want to know is, what are you gonna get out of it? What do you think this boy’s going to give you?

Now Davy’s a nice boy. Better than most I’d say. Definitely better. But darling— he’s not gonna give you nothing! If you think he will you got another thing coming.

“So I’m just saying I hope that painting’s all you been giving him and all you will give him, and this is for your own good I’m telling you. Because you already got what men want right down here and it ain’t your goddamn artwork.”

I could see Meg’s face begin to tremble, and I knew she was trying not to cry. But unexpected as all this was I was trying not to laugh. Donny too. The whole thing was weird and maybe it was partly the tension, but what Ruth had said about the artwork was funny.

Her arm tightened around Meg’s shoulders.

“And if you give them what they want, then you’re nothing but a slut, honey. You know what a slut is? Do you, Susan? Of course you don’t. You’re too young. Well, a slut’s somebody who’ll spread her legs for a man, it’s that simple.

So they can weasel their way inside. Woofer, you quit your goddamn grinning.”

“Anybody who’s a slut deserves a thrashing. Anybody in this town would agree with me. So I just warn you, honey, any slut ting around this house will mean your ass is grass and Ruth’s the lawn mower.”

She released Meg and walked into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator door.

“Now,” she said.

“Who wants a beer?” She gestured toward the painting.

“Kind of pale-looking thing, anyway,” she said, “doncha think?” and reached for the six-pack.

Two beers was all it took me in those days and I went home lazy and high, with the usual promise not to breathe a word to my parents, which wasn’t necessary.

I’d sooner have chopped off a finger.

Once Ruth finished her lecture the rest of the evening had been pretty uneventful. Meg went into the bathroom for a while and when she came out again it was as though nothing had happened. Her eyes were dry. Her face an unreadable blank. We watched Danny Thomas and drank our beers and then at one point during a commercial I made plans to go bowling Saturday with Willie and Donny. I tried to catch Meg’s eye but she wouldn’t look at me. When the beers were done I went home.

I hung the painting next to the mirror in my room.

But there was a feeling of strangeness that wouldn’t leave me. I’d never heard anyone use the word slut before but I knew what it meant. I’d known since cribbing Peyton Place from my mother. I wondered if Eddie’s sister Denise was still too young to qualify. I remembered her naked, bound to a tree, her thick smooth tender nipples. Crying, laughing—sometimes both together. I remembered the folded flesh between her legs.

I thought about Meg.

I lay in bed and thought how easy it was to hurt a person. It didn’t have to be physical. All you had to do was take a good hard kick at something they cared about.

I could too if I wanted. Js People were vulnerable.

I thought about my parents and what they were doing and how they kept kicking at each other. So regularly now that, being in the middle as I was I had contrived not to care about either of them.

fl I Little things, mostly, but they added up. I couldn’t sleep. My parents were in the next room, my father snoring. I got up and went into the kitchen for a Coke.

Then I went into the living room and sat on the couch. I didn't turn the lights on. It was well after midnight. The night was warm. There was no breeze. As usual my parents had left the windows open.

Through the screen I could see directly into the Chandlers' living room. Their lights were still burning. Their windows were open too and I heard voices. I couldn't make out much of what was being said but I knew who was speaking. Willie. Ruth. Then Meg. Then Donny. Even Woofer was still up—you could hear his voice high and shrill as girl's, laughing.

The others were all yelling about something.

"... for a boy!" I heard Ruth say. Then she faded out again into a mixed jumble of sounds and voices all together. Then I saw Meg move back into the frame of the living-room window. She was pointing, yelling, her whole body rigid and shaking with anger.

"You will not!" I heard her say.

Then Ruth said something low and out of my hearing range but it came out like a growl, you could get that much, and you could see Meg sort of collapse all of a sudden, you could watch her fold. And then she was crying.

And a hand shot out and slapped her.

It slapped her so hard she fell back out of frame and I couldn't see her anymore.

Willie moved forward.

He started to follow her. Slowly.

Like he was stalking her.

"That's it!" I heard Ruth say. Meaning, I think, that Willie should let her alone.

There was a moment where I guess nobody moved.

Then bodies came and went for a while, drifting by the window, everybody looking sullen and angry, Willie and Woofer and Donny and Ruth and Meg picking up things from the floor or rearranging the chairs or whatever and slowly

moving away.I heard no more voices, no talking.The only one I didn't see was Susan.

I sat watching.

The lights went off.You could see a dim glow from the bedrooms and that was all.Then even that was gone and the house was black as ours was.

That Saturday at the alleys Kenny Robertson missed his seven pin for an easy spare in the tenth frame, finishing with a 107.Kenny was skinny and had a tendency to throw every pound he had into the ball and throw it wild.He came back mopping his brow with his father's Incky handkerchief, which hadn't been too lucky for him at all that day.

He sat between me and Willie behind the scorecard.

We watched Donny line up on his usual spot to the left of the second arrow.

"Yon think any more about it?"he asked Willie.

"About getting Meg into The Game?"

Willie smiled.I guess he was feeling good.He was probably going to break 150 and that didn't happen often.He shook his head.

"We got our own Game now."he said.

Those nights I'd sleep at the Chandlers', once we got tired of fooling around and Woofer was asleep we'd talk.

It was mostly Donny and I. Willie never had much to say and what he did say was never too smart.But Donny was bright enough and, as I said, the closest I had to a best friend, so we'd talk—about school and girls, the kids on American Bandstand, the endless mysteries of sex, what the rock 'n' roll tunes we heard on the radio really meant and so on, until long into the night.

We talked about wishes, hopes, even nightmares sometimes.

It was always Donny who initiated these talks and always I who finished them.At some point long past exhaustion I'd lean over the top of my bunk and

say something like, see what I mean?and he'd be asleep, leaving me alone at the mercy of my thoughts, uncomfortable and unspent, sometimes till dawn.It took time for me to cut deep enough into whatever it was I felt and then once I did I couldn't bear to give up the taste of it.

I'm still that way.

The dialogue is solo now.I don't talk.No matter who's in bed with me I never do.My thoughts slip off into night mares sometimes but I don't share them.I have become now ' , what I only began to be then—completely self-protective.It started, I suppose, with my mother coming into my | room when I was seven.I was asleep.

"I'm leaving your dad," she said, waking me.

"But I don't want you to worry.

I'll take you with me.I won't leave you.Not ever."And I know that from seven to fourteen I waited, prepared myself, became myself who was separate from each of them.

That, I guess, was how it started." But between seven and thirteen Ruth happened, and Meg and Susan happened.Without them that conversation with my mother might even have been good for me.It might only have saved me from shock and confusion once the time came. Because kids are resilient.They bounce back to confidence and sharing.

I wasn't able to.And that's due to what happened after, to what I did and didn't do.

My first wife, Evelyn, calls me sometimes, wakes me up at night.

"Are the children all right?"she asks me.Her voice is terrified.

We had no kids together, Evelyn and I. She's been in and out of institutions a number of times, suffering bouts of acute depression and anxiety but still it's uncanny, this fixation of hers.I Because I never told her. Not any of this, never, a So how could she know?

Do I talk in my sleep?Did I confess to her one night?

Or is she simply sensing something hidden in me—about the only real reason we never did have children. About why I never allowed us to.

Her calls are like night birds flying screeching around my head. I keep waiting for them to return. When they do I'm taken by surprise.

It's frightening.

Are the children all right?

I've long since learned not to ruffle her. Yes, Evelyn, I tell her. Sure. They're fine. Go back to sleep now, I say.

But the children are not fine.

They will never be.

knocked on the back screen door.

Nobody answered.

I opened it and walked inside.

I heard them laughing right away. It was coming from one of the bedrooms. Meg's was a kind of high-pitched squealing sound, Woofer's a hysterical giggle. Willie Jr's and Donny's were lower, more masculine-sounding.

I wasn't supposed to be there—I was being punished.

I'd been working on a model of a B-52, a Christmas present from my father, and I couldn't get one of the wheels on right.

So I tried about three or four times and then hauled off and kicked it to pieces against the bedroom door. My mother came in and it was a whole big scene and I was grounded.

My mother was out shopping now. For a moment at least, I was free.

I headed for the bedrooms.

They had Meg up against the bedroom wall in a corner by the window.

Donny turned around.

“Hey, David!She’s ticklish} Meg’s ticklish!”

And then it was like there was this prearranged signal because they all went at her at once, going for her ribs while she twisted and tried to push them away and then doubled over, elbows down to cover her ribs, laughing, her long red ponytail swinging.

“Get her!”

“I got her!”

“gc/her, Willie!”

I looked over and there was Susan sitting on the bed, and she was laughing too. (

“Owww!”

I heard a slap.I looked up.

Meg’s hand was covering her breast and Woofer had his own hand up to his face where the redness was spreading and you could see he was going to cry.Willie and Donny stood away.

“What the hell!”

“ Donny was mad.It was fine if he belted Woofer but he didn’t like it if anybody else did.”You bitch!“said Willie.He took an awkward open-handed swing at the top of her head.She moved easily out of its way.He didn’t try again.

“What’d you have to do that for?”

“You saw what he did!”

“He didn’t do nothin’.”

“He pinched me.”

“So what.”

Woofers was crying now.

“I’m tellin’” he howled.

“Go ahead,” said Meg.

“You won’t like it if I do,” said Woofers.

“I don’t care what you do. I don’t care what any of you do.” She pushed Willie aside and walked between them past me down the hall into the living room. I heard the front door slam.

“Little bitch,” said Willie. He turned to Susan.

“Your sister’s a goddamn bitch.”

Susan said nothing. He moved toward her though and I saw her flinch.

“You see that?”

“I wasn’t looking,” I said.

Woofers was sniveling. There was snot running all down his chin.

“She hit me!” he yelled. Then he ran past me too.

“I’m telling Ma,” said Willie.

“Yeah. Me too,” said Donny.

“She can’t get away with that.”

“We were just foolin’ around, for chrissakes.”

Donny nodded.

“She really whacked him.”

“Well, Woofers touched her tit.”

“So what.He didn’t mean to.”

“You could get a shiner like that.”

“He could still get one.”

“Bitch.”

There was all this nervous energy in the room.Willie and Donny were pacing like pent-up bulls.Susan slid off the bed.Her braces made a sharp metallic clatter.

“Where you going?”said Donny.

“I want to see Meg,” she said quietly.

“Screw Meg.You stay here.You saw what she did, didn’t you?”

Susan nodded.

“All right then.You know she’s gonna get punished, right?”

He sounded very reasonable, like an older brother explaining something very patiently to a not-too-bright sister.

She nodded again.

“So you want to side with her and get punished too?

You want your privileges taken away?”

“No.”

“Then you stay right here, okay?”|

“All right.”

“Right in this room.”

“All right.”

“Let’s find Ma,” he said to Willie.i I followed them out of the bedroom through

the dining room and out the back door.

Ruth was around back of the garage, weeding her patch of tomatoes. The dress she wore was old and faded and much too big for her, cinched tight at the middle. The scoop neck hung open wide.

She never wore a bra. I stood over her and I could see her breasts almost to the nipple. They were small and pale and they trembled as she worked. I kept glancing away, afraid she'd notice, but my eyes were like a compass needle and her breasts were due north, a "Meg hit Woofer," said Willie.

| "She did?" She didn't seem concerned. She just kept weeding, a "Slapped him," said Donny. a "Why?"

"We were just fooling around."

"Everybody was tickling her," said Willie.

"So she hauls off and clobbers him in the face. Just like that."

She tugged out a patch of weeds. The breasts shook.

They had gooseflesh on them. I was fascinated. She looked at me and my eyes got to hers just in time.

"You too, Davy?"

"Huh?"

"You tickling Meg too?"

"No. I just came in."

She smiled.

"I'm not accusing you."

She got to her knees and then stood up and pulled off the dirty work gloves.

"Where's she now?"

“Don’t know,” said Donny.

“She ran out the door.”

“How about Susan?”

“She’s in the bedroom.”

“She saw all this?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

She marched across the lawn toward the house and we followed. At the porch she wiped her thin bony hands over her hips. She pulled off the scarf that bound her short brown hair and shook it free.

I figured I had maybe twenty minutes before my mother came home from shopping so I went inside.

We followed her into the bedroom. Susan sat right where we left her on the bed looking at a magazine, open to a picture of Liz and Eddie Fisher on one page facing across to Debbie Reynolds on the other. Eddie and Liz looked happy, smiling. Debbie looked sour.

“Susan? Where’s Meg?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. She left.”

Ruth sat down next to her on the bed. She patted her hand.

“Now I’m told you saw what happened here. That right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Woofer touched Meg and Meg hit him.”

“Touched her?”| Susan nodded and placed her hand over her skinny little chest like she was pledging allegiance to the flag.

“Here,” she said.

Ruth just stared for a moment.?

Then she said, "And did you try to stop her?"

"Stop Meg you mean?"

"Yes.From hitting Ralphie."

Susan looked bewildered.

"I couldn't.It was too fast, Mrs.Chandler.Woofer touched her and then right away Meg hit him."

"You should have tried, honey."She patted her hand again.

"Meg's your sister."| "Yes, ma'am."| "You hit somebody in the face and it can do all kinds of things.You could miss and break an eardrum, poke out an eye.That's dangerous behavior."

"Yes, Mrs.Chandler."

"Ruth.I told you.Ruth."

"Yes, Ruth."

"And you know what it means to be in connivance with somebody who does that kind of thing?"

She shook her head.

"It means you're guilty too, even though maybe you didn't do anything in particular.You're sort of a fellow traveler.You understand me?"

"I don't know."

Ruth sighed.

"Let me explain to you.You love your sister, right?"

Susan nodded.

“And because you love her, you’d forgive her something like this, wouldn’t you? Like hitting Ralphie?”

“She didn’t mean to hurt him. She just got mad!”

“Of course she did. So you’d forgive her, am I right?”

“Uh-huh.”

Ruth smiled.

“Well now you see that’s just plain wrong, honey! That’s just what puts you in connivance with her. What she did wasn’t right, it’s bad behavior, and you forgiving her just because you love her, that’s not right either.

You got to stop this sympathizing Suzie. It doesn’t matter that Meg’s your sister. Right’s right. You got to remember that if you want to get along in life. Now you just slip over the side of the bed here, pull up your dress and slide down your drawers.”

Susan stared at her. Wide-eyed, frozen.

Ruth got off the bed. She unbuckled her belt.

“C’mon, hon’,” she said.

“It’s for your own good. I got to teach you about connivance. You see, Meg’s not here for her share. So you got to get it for both of you. Your share’s for not saying, hey, cut that out, Meg—sister or no sister. Right’s right. Her share’s for doing it in the first place.

So you come on over here now. Don’t make me drag you.”

Susan just stared. It was as though she couldn’t move.

“Okay,” said Ruth.

“Disobedience is another thing.”

She reached over and firmly—though not what you’d call roughly—took Susan by the arm and slid her off the bed. X Susan began to cry. The leg braces

clattered. Ruth turned her | around so she faced the bed and leaned her over. Then she | pulled up the back of her frilled red dress and tucked it into her waistband. U

Willie snorted, laughing. Ruth shot him a look. U She pulled down the little white cotton panties, down over the braces around her ankles.

“We’ll give you five for conniving, ten for Meg. And five for disobeying. Twenty.” J Susan was really crying now. I could hear her. I watched the stream of tears roll down across her cheek. I felt suddenly shamed and started to move back through the doorway. Some impulse from Donny told me that maybe he wanted to do the same. But Ruth must have seen us. j “You stay put, boys. Girls just cry. There’s nothing you can do about it. But this is for her own good and you being here’s a part of it and I want you to stay.” i The belt was thin fabric, not leather. So maybe it wouldn’t hurt too bad, I thought.

She doubled it over and raised it above her head. It whistled down.

Smack.

Susan gasped and began crying in earnest, loudly.

Her behind was as pale as Ruth’s breasts had been, covered with a fine thin platinum down. And now it trembled too. I could see a red spot rise high on her left cheek near the dimple.

I looked at Ruth as she raised the belt again. Her lips were pressed tight together. Otherwise she was expressionless, concentrating.

The belt fell again and Susan howled.

A third time and then a fourth, in rapid succession.

Her ass was splotchy red now.

A fifth.

She seemed to be almost gagging on mucus and tears, her breath coming in gulps.

Ruth was swinging wider. We had to back away.

I counted. Six. Seven. Eight, nine, ten.

Susan's legs were twitching. Her knuckles white where she gripped the bedspread.

I'd never heard such crying.

Run, I thought. Jesus! I'd damn well run.

But then of course she couldn't run. She might just as well have been chained there.

And that made me think of The Game.

Here was Ruth, I thought, playing The Game. I'll be goddamned. And even though I winced every time the belt came down I just couldn't get over it. The idea was amazing to me. An adult. An adult was playing The Game. It wasn't the same exactly but it was close enough.

And all of a sudden it didn't feel so forbidden anymore. The guilt seemed to fall away. But the excitement of it remained. I could feel my fingernails dig deep into the palms of my hands.

I kept count. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.

There were tiny beads of perspiration across Ruth's upper lip and forehead. Her strokes were mechanical.

Fourteen. Fifteen. Her arm went up. Beneath the belt less shapeless dress I could see her belly heave.

"Wow!"

Woofers slipped into the room between me and Donny.

Sixteen.

He was staring at Susan's red, twisted face.

“Wow,” he said again.

And I knew he was thinking what I was thinking —what we all were thinking.

Punishments were private. At my house they were at least. At everybody’s house, as far as I knew. This wasn’t punishment. This was The Game.

Seventeen. Eighteen. H Susan fell to the floor. | Ruth bent over her.

She was sobbing, her whole frail body twitching now, head buried between her arms, her knees drawn up as tight to her chest as the casts permitted.

Ruth was breathing heavily. She pulled up Susan’s panties. She lifted her up and slid her back on the bed, lying her on her side and smoothing the dress down over her legs. j “All right,” she said softly.

“That’ll do. You just rest now. You owe me two.”

And then we all just stood a moment, listening to the muffled sobbing.

I heard a car pull in next door.

“Shit!” I said.

“My mother!”

I raced through the living room, out the door to the side of their house and peered through the hedges. My mother was pulled in all the way to the garage. She had the back of the station wagon open and was bent over lifting out bags marked

A&P.

I dashed across the driveway to our front door and ran up the stairs to my room. I opened a magazine.

I heard the back door open.

“David! Come on down here and help me with the groceries!”

It slammed shut.

I went out to the car. My mother was frowning. She handed me one bag after another.

“The place was absolutely mobbed,” she said.

“What have you been doing?”

“Nothing. Reading.”

As I turned to go back inside I saw Meg across the street from the Chandlers’ standing by the trees in front of the Zorns’ house.

She was staring at the Chandlers’ and chewing on a blade of grass, looking thoughtful, as though she were trying to decide about something.

She didn’t seem to see me.

I wondered what she knew.

I took the bags inside.

Then later I went out to the garage to get the garden hose and I saw them in the yard, just Meg and Susan, sitting in the tall splootch grass beyond the birch tree.

Meg was brushing Susan’s hair. Long smooth strokes of the brush that were firm and even but delicate too, as though the hair could bruise if you didn’t get it right. Her other hand caressed it from below and under, stroking with just the tips of the fingers, lifting it and letting it gently fall.

Susan was smiling. Not a big smile but you could see her pleasure, how Meg was soothing her. And for a moment I realized how connected the two of them were, how alone and special in that connection. I almost envied them.

I didn’t disturb them. I found the garden hose. Coming out of the garage the breeze had shifted and I could hear Meg humming. It was very soft, like a lullaby.

“Goodnight Irene.” A song my mother used to sing on long nighttime car trips when I was little.

Goodnight, Irene, goodnight, Irene, I’ll see you in my dreams.

I caught myself humming it all day. And every time I did I'd see Meg and Susan sitting in the grass together and feel the sun on my face and the stroke of the brush and the soft smooth hands.*“

David, have you got any money?“

I felt around in my pockets and came

up with a crinkled dollar bill and thirty-five cents in change. We were walking over to the playground, Meg and I. There was going to be a game there in a little while. I had my left-handed fielder's mitt and an old black-taped ball.

I showed her the money.

“Would you loan it to me?“

“All of it?“

“I'm hungry,” she said.

“Yeah?“

“I want to go over to Cozy Snacks for a sandwich.“

“For a sandwich?“ I laughed.

“Why doncha just steal a couple of candy bars? The counter's easy there.“

I'd done it myself on plenty of occasions. Most of us did. The best was just to walk up to whatever you wanted and take it and then walk right out again. Nothing furtive and no hesitations. The place was always busy. There was nothing to it. And nobody had any use for Mr. Holly, the old guy who ran the place, so there wasn't any guilt involved.

But Meg just frowned.

“I don't steal,” she said.

Well jeez, I thought, meet Miss Priss.

I felt a little contempt for her. Everybody stole. It was part of being a kid.

“Just loan me the money, will you?” she said.

“I’ll pay you back. I promise.”

I couldn’t stay mad at her.

“Okay. Sure,” I said. I dumped it into her hand.

“But what do you want a sandwich for? Make one at Ruth’s.”

“I can’t.”

“How come?”

“I’m not supposed to.”

“Why?”

“I’m not supposed to eat yet.”

We crossed the street. I looked left and right and then I looked at her. She had that masked look. Like there was something she wasn’t telling. Plus she was blushing. |
“I don’t get it.”

Kenny and Eddie and Lou Marino were already on the diamond tossing a ball around. Denise was standing behind the backstop watching them. But nobody saw us yet. I could tell Meg wanted to go but I just stared at her.

“Ruth says I’m fat,” she said finally.

I laughed.

“Well?” she said.

“Well what?”

“Am I?”

“What? Fat?” I knew she was serious but I still had to laugh. “”Course not. She’s

kidding you.“

She turned abruptly.

“Some joke,” she said.

“You just try going without dinner and breakfast and lunch for a day.”

Then she stopped and turned back to me.

“Thanks,” she said.

And then she walked away.

The ball game dissolved about an hour after it started.

By that time most of the kids on the block were there, not just Kenny and Eddie and Denise and Lou Morino but Willie, Donny, Tony Morino and even Glen Knoll and Harry Gray, who showed up because Lou was playing. With the older kids there it was a good fast game—until Eddie hit his hard line drive down the third-base line and started running.

Everybody but Eddie knew it was foul. But there was no telling Eddie that. He rounded the bases while Kenny went to chase the ball. And then there was the usual argument.

Fuck you and fuck you and no, fuck you.

The only difference was that this time Eddie picked up his bat and went after Lou Morino.

Lou was bigger and older than Eddie but Eddie had the bat, and the upshot was that rather than risk a broken nose or a concussion he stalked off the field in one direction taking Harry and Glen along with him while Eddie stalked off the other way.

The rest of us played catch.

That was what we were doing when Meg came by again.

She dropped some change into my hand and I put it in my pocket.

“I owe you eighty-five cents,” she said.

“Okay.”

I noticed that her hair was just a little oily, like she hadn’t washed it that morning. She still looked nice though.

“Want to do something?” she said.

“What?”

I looked around. I guess I was afraid the others would hear.

“I don’t know. Go down by the brook?”

Donny threw me the ball. I pegged it at Willie. As usual he slumped after it too slowly and missed.

“Never mind,” said Meg.

“You’re too busy.”

She was irritated or hurt or something. She started to walk away. “No. Hey. Wait.”

I couldn’t ask her to play. It was hardball and she had no glove.

“Okay, sure. We’ll go down to the brook. Hang on a minute.”

There was only one way to do this gracefully. I had to ask the others.

“Hey guys! Want to go down to the brook? Catch some crayfish or something? It’s hot here.”

Actually the brook didn’t sound bad to me. It was hot.

“Sure. I’ll go,” said Donny. Willie shrugged and nodded.

“Me too,” said Denise.

Great, I thought. Denise. Now all we need is Woofer.

“I’m gonna go get some lunch,” said Kenny.

“Maybe I’ll meet you down there.”

“Okay.”

Tony vacillated and then decided he was hungry too.

So that left just us five.

“Let’s stop at the house,” said Donny.

“Get some jars for the crayfish and a Thermos of Kool-Aid.”

We went in through the back door and you could hear the washing-machine going in the basement.

“Donny? That you?”

“Yeah, Ma.”

He turned to Meg.

“Get the Kool-Aid, will ya? I’ll go down after the jars and see what she wants.”

I sat with Willie and Denise at the kitchen table. There were toast crumbs on it and I brushed them onto the floor.

There was also an ashtray crammed with cigarette butts. I looked through the butts but there was nothing big enough to crib for later.

Meg had the Thermos out and was carefully pouring lime Kool-Aid into it from Ruth’s big pitcher when they came upstairs.

Willie had two peanut butter jars and a stack of tin cans with him. Ruth was wiping her hands on her faded apron. She smiled at us and then looked over at Meg in the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Just pouring out some Kool-Aid.”

She dug into the pocket of her apron and took out a pack of Tareytons and lit one.

“Thought I said stay out of the kitchen.”

“Donny wanted some Kool-Aid. It was Donny’s idea.”

“I don’t care whose idea it was.”

She blew out some smoke and started coughing. It was a bad cough, right up from the lungs, and she couldn’t even talk for a moment. | “It’s only Kool-Aid,” said Meg.

“I’m not eating.”

Ruth nodded.

“Question is,” she said, taking another drag of the cigarette, “question is, what did you sneak before I got here?” Meg finished pouring and put down the pitcher.

“Nothing,” she sighed.

“I didn’t sneak anything.” a Ruth nodded again.

“Come here,” she said.

Meg just stood there. H

“I said come over here.”

She walked over.

“Open your mouth and let me smell your breath.”

“What?”;

Beside me Denise began to giggle.

“Don’t sass me. Open your mouth.”

“Ruth...”

“Open it.”

“No!”

“What’s that?What’d you say?”

“You don’t have any right to...”

“I got all the right in the world. Open it.”

“No!”

“I said open it, liar.”

“I’m not a liar.”

“Well I know you’re a slut so I guess you’re a liar too.

Open it!“

“No.”

“Open your mouth!”

“No!”

“I’m telling you to.”

“I won’t.”

“Oh yes you will.If I have to get these boys to pry it open you will.”

Willie snorted, laughing.Donny was still standing in the doorway holding the cans and jars.He looked embarrassed.

“Open your mouth, slut.”

That made Denise giggle again.

Meg looked Ruth straight in the eye.She took a breath.And for a moment she suddenly managed an adult, almost stunning dignity.

“I told you, Ruth,” she said.

“I said no.”

Even Denise shut up then.

We were astonished.

We’d never seen anything like it before.

Kids were powerless. Almost by definition. Kids were supposed to endure humiliation, or run away from it. If you protested, it had to be oblique. You ran into your room and slammed the door. You screamed and yelled. You brooded through dinner. You acted out—or broke things accidentally on purpose. You were sullen, silent. You screwed up in school. And that was about it. All the guns in your arsenal.

But what you did not do was you did not stand up to an adult and say go fuck yourself in so many words. You did not simply stand there and calmly say no. We were still too young for that. So that now it was pretty amazing.

Ruth smiled and stubbed out her cigarette in the cluttered ashtray.

“I guess I’ll go get Susan,” she said.

“I expect she’s in her room.”

And then it was her turn to stare Meg down.

It lasted a moment, the two of them facing off like gunfighters.

Then Meg’s composure shattered.

“You leave my sister out of this! You leave her alone!”

Her hands were balled up into fists, white at the knuckles. And I knew that she knew, then, about the beating the other day.

I wondered if there had been other times, other beatings.

But in a way we were relieved. This was more like it.

More like what we were used to. |

Ruth just shrugged.

“No need for you to get all upset about it, Meggy. I just want to ask her what she knows about you raiding the icebox in between meals. If you won’t do what I ask, then I guess she’d be the one to know.”... “She wasn’t even with us!” H
“I’m sure she’s heard you, honey. I’m sure the neighbors have heard you. Anyhow, sisters know, don’t they.

Sorta instinctive, really.“

She turned toward the bedroom.

“Susan?”

Meg reached out and grabbed her arm. And it was like she was a whole other girl now, scared, helpless, desperate. | “God damn you!” she said.

You knew right away it was a mistake. H Ruth whirled and smacked her. 1 “You touch me? You touch me, dammit? You bold with me?”

She slapped her again as Meg backed away, and again as she stumbled against the refrigerator, off balance, and fell to her knees. Ruth leaned over and gripped her jaw, pulling on it hard.

“Now you open your goddamn mouth, you hear me?

Or I’ll kick the living shit out of you and your precious little sister! You hear me? Willie? Donny?“

Willie got up and went to her. Donny looked confused.

“Hold her.”

I felt frozen. Everything was happening so fast. I was aware of Denise sitting next to me, goggle-eyed.

“I said hold her.”

Willie got out of his seat and took her right arm and I guess Ruth was hurting her

where she held tight to her jaw because she didn't resist. Donny put his jars and cans on the table and took hold of her left. Two of the cans rolled off the table and clattered to the floor.

"Now open, tramp."

And then Meg did fight, trying to get to her feet, bucking and rolling against them, but they had her tight.

Willie was enjoying himself, that was obvious. But Donny looked grim. Ruth had both hands on her now, trying to pry her jaws apart.

Meg bit her.

Ruth yelled and stumbled back. Meg squirmed to her feet. Willie twisted her arm behind her back and yanked it up. She yelled and doubled over and tried to pull away, shaking her left arm hard to get it away from Donny in a kind of simultaneous panic and she almost made it, Donny's grip was uncertain enough, she almost got it free.

Then Ruth stepped forward again.

For an instant she just stood there, studying her, looking I guess for an opening. Then she balled up a fist and hit her in the stomach exactly the way a man would hit a man, and nearly as hard. What you heard was like somebody punching a basketball.

Meg fell, choking, and gasped for breath.

Donny let her go.

"Jesus!" whispered Denise beside me.

Ruth stepped back.

"You want to fight?" she said.

"Okay. Fight."

Meg shook her head.

“You don’t want to fight?No?”

She shook her head.

Willie looked at his mother.

“Too bad,” he said quietly, He still had her arm.And now he started twisting.She doubled over.

“Willie’s right,” said Ruth.

“It is too bad.Come on, Meg honey, fight.Fight him.”I Willie twisted.She jumped with the pain and gasped and shook her head a third time.| “Well I guess she just won’t do it,” said Ruth.

“This girl don’t want to do anything I say today.”

She shook the hand Meg had bitten and examined it.

From where I sat it was just a red spot.Meg hadn’t broken the skin or anything.

“Let her go,” said Ruth.

He dropped her arm.Meg slumped forward.She was crying.

I didn’t like to watch.I glanced away.

I saw Susan standing in the hall, holding on to the wall, looking frightened, staring around the corner.Eyes riveted on her sister.

“I gotta go,” I said in a voice that sounded strangely thick to me.

“What about the brook?”said Willie.Sounding disappointed, the big ass.Like nothing had happened at all.

“Later,” I said.

“I gotta go now.”

I was aware of Ruth watching me.

I got up.I didn't want to go by Meg for some reason.

Instead I walked past Susan to the front door.She didn't seem to notice me.

"David," said Ruth.Her voice was very calm.

"Yes?"

"This is what you'd call a domestic dispute," she said.

"Just between us here.You saw what you saw.But it's nobody's business but ours.You know?You understand?"

I hesitated, then nodded.

"Good boy," she said.

"I knew you were.I knew you'd understand."

I walked outside.It was a hot, muggy day.Inside it had been cooler.

I walked back to the woods, cutting away from the path to the brook and into the deeper woods behind the Morino house.

It was cooler there.It smelled of pine and earth.

I kept seeing Meg slumped over, crying.And then I'd see her standing in front of Ruth looking her coolly in the eye saying I told you I said no.For some reason these alternated with remembering an argument with my mother earlier that week.You're just like your father, she'd said.I'd responded furiously.Not nearly as well as Meg had.I'd lost it.I'd raged.I'd hated her.I thought about that now in a detached kind of way and then I thought about all this other stuff today.

It had been an amazing morning.

But it was as though everything canceled everything.

I walked through the woods.

I didn't feel a thing.

You could get from my house to Cozy Snacks through the woods by crossing the brook at the Big Rock and then walking along the far bank past two old houses and a construction site, and I was coming home that fading to the next day with a Three Musketeers, some red licorice there on some Fleer's Double Bubble—which, thinking of Meg, I'd I waiting illy paid for—in a paper bag when I heard Meg scream. I knew it was her. It was just a scream. It could have um over anybody's. But I knew. (nds the I got quiet. I moved along the bank.

She was standing on the Big Rock. Willie and Woofer, which't have surprised her there with her hand in the water nobody iuse her sleeve was rolled up and the brook water beaded was big forearm and you could see the long livid scar like a worm A you'd thing up through her skin. in his They were pelting her with the cans from the cellar, when we Woofer's aim, at least, was good.ed, and But then Willie was aiming for the head.

A harder target. He always went wide.. He'd While Woofer hit her first on her bare knee and then, en she turned, in the center of the back.

, Meg, She turned again and saw them pick up the glass Torino anut butter jars. Woofer fired.

Glass shattered at her feet, sprayed her legs.

It would have hurt her bad to get hit with one of those.

There was nowhere for her to go except into the brook.

She couldn't have scaled the high bank beside me, at least not in time. So that was what she did.

She went into the water.

The brook was running fast that day and the bottom was covered with mossy stones. I saw her trip and fall almost immediately while another jar smashed on a rock nearby. She hauled herself up, gasping and wet to the shoulders, and tried to run. She got four steps and fell again.

Willie and Woofer were howling, laughing so hard they forgot to throw their jars any more.

She got up and this time kept her footing and splashed downstream, a When she turned the corner there was good heavy thicket to cover her. | It was over.| Amazingly nobody had seen me.They still didn't.I felt like a ghost.

I watched them gather up their few remaining cans and jars.Then they walked off laughing down the path to their house.I could hear them all the way, voices gradually fading.I Assholes, I thought.There's glass all over now.We can't go wading.Not at least until it floods again.

I crossed carefully across the Rock to the other side.

It was dusk, a warm night gracefully fading to dark, and there were hundreds of us out there on blankets in Memorial Field in front of the high school waiting for the fireworks to start.

Donny and I sat with my parents—I'd invited him over for dinner that night—and they sat with their friends the Hendersons, who lived two blocks away.

The Hendersons were Catholic and childless, which right away meant that something was wrong, though nobody seemed to know what it was exactly. Mr.Henderson was big and outdoorsy and given to plaid and corduroy, what you'd call a man's man, kind of fun.He raised beagles in his backyard and let us shoot his BB guns sometimes when we went over. Mrs.Henderson was thin, blond, pug-nosed, and pretty.

Donny once said he couldn't see the problem.He'd have fucked her in a minute.

From where we sat we could see Willie, Woofer, Meg, Susan and Ruth across the field sitting next to the Morino family.

The entire town was there.

If you could walk or drive or crawl on the Fourth of July you came to the fireworks.Apart from the Memorial Day Parade it was our one big spectacle of the year.

And pro forma the cops were there.Nobody really expected any trouble. The town was still at that stage where everybody knew everybody, or knew somebody else who did.

You went out and left your door open all day in case somebody came by and you weren't there, j The cops were family friends, most of them. My dad knew them from the bar or from the VFW.; Mostly they were just making sure that nobody threw cherry bombs too near the blankets.Standing around waiting for the show like the rest of us.

Donny and I listened to Mr.Henderson who was talking about the beagles' new litter and drank iced tea from the Thermos and belched out pot roast fumes at one another, laughing.My mother always made pot roast with a lot of onions in it.It drove my father crazy but it was just the way we liked it.In half an hour we'd be farting.s The public-address system blared John Philip Sousa.

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A quarter-moon was up over the high school building.

In the dim gray light you could see little kids chasing each other through the crowd.People were lighting sparklers.

Behind us a full pack of two-inchers went off like machinegun fire. We decided to get some ice cream.H The Good Humor truck was doing a bang-up business, kids wading in four deep.We gradually pushed our way through without getting stepped on.I got a Brown Cow and Donny got a Fudgesicle and we hauled ourselves back out again.

Then we saw Meg by the side of the truck, talking to Mr.Jennings.

And it stopped us dead in our tracks.

Because Mr.Jennings was also Officer Jennings.He was a cop.

And there was something in the way she was acting, gesturing with her hands, leaning forward sort of into him, so that we knew right away what she was saying.

It was scary, shocking.

We stood there rooted to the spot.

Meg was telling. Betraying Ruth. Betraying Donny and everybody.

She was facing away from us.

For a moment we just stared at her and then as if on cue we looked at one another.

Then we went over. Eating our ice creams. Very casual. We stood right beside her off to one side.

Mr. Jennings glanced at us for a second but then looked off in the general direction of Ruth and Willie and the others, and then, nodding, listening carefully, looked attentively back to Meg.

We worked studiously at the ice creams. We looked around.

“Well, that’s her right, I guess,” he said.

“No,” said Meg.

“You don’t understand.”

But then we couldn’t hear the rest of it.

Mr. Jennings smiled and shrugged. He put a big freckled hand on her shoulder.

“Listen,” he said.

“For all I know maybe your parents would’ve felt exactly the same. Who’s to say? You’ve got to think of Miz Chandler as your mom now, don’t you?”

She shook her head.

And then he became aware of us, I think, really aware of Donny and me and who we were for the first time and what we might mean in terms of the conversation they were having there. You could see his face change. But Meg was still talking, arguing.

He watched us over her shoulder, looked at us long and hard.

Then he took her arm.

“Let’s walk,” he said.

I saw her glance nervously in Ruth’s direction but it was getting hard to see by now, pretty much full dark with only the moon and stars and the occasional sparkler to see by, so there wasn’t much chance that Ruth had noticed them together. From where I stood the crowd was already a shapeless mass like scrub and cactus studding a prairie. I knew where they were sitting but I couldn’t make them out or my parents and the Hendersons either.

But you knew perfectly well why she was scared. I felt scared myself. What she was doing felt exciting and forbidden, exactly like trying to see her through the windows from the birch tree.

Mr. Jennings turned his back to us and gently moved her away.

“Shit”, whispered Donny.

I heard a whoosh. The sky exploded. Bright white puffballs popped and showered down.

Ooooooooo, went the crowd.

And in the ghostly white light of the aftershock I looked at him. I saw confusion and worry.

He had always been the reluctant one with Meg. He still was now.

“What are you going to do?” I asked him.

He shook his head.

“He won’t believe her,” he said.

“He won’t do nothin’.

Cops talk but they never do anything to you.”

It was like something Ruth had said to us once. Cops talk but they never do.

He repeated it now as we walked back to our blankets like an article of faith. Like it had to be.

Almost like a prayer.

he prowler car pulled in around eight the following evening. I saw Mr. Jennings walk up the steps and knock and Ruth let him in. Then I waited, watching out my living-room window. Something turning over and over in my stomach.

My parents were at a birthday party at the Knights of Columbus and my sitter was Linda Cotton, eighteen and freckled and, I thought, cute, though nothing compared to Meg. At seventy-five cents an hour she couldn't have cared less what I was doing so long as it was quiet and didn't interfere with her watching The Adventures of Ellery Queen on the TV.

We had an agreement, Linda and I. I wouldn't tell about her boyfriend Steve coming over or the two of them necking on the sofa all night and I could do pretty much whatever I wanted on condition that I was home in bed before my parents returned. She knew I was getting too old for sitters anyhow.

So I waited until the prowler car pulled away again and then I went next door. It was about quarter to nine.

They were sitting in the living room and dining room.

All of them. It was quiet and nobody moved and I got the feeling it had been that way for a long time.

Everybody was staring at Meg. Even Susan was.

I had the strangest feeling.

Later, during the Sixties, I would realize what it was. I would open a letter from the Selective Service System and read the card inside that told me my status had now been changed to 1A.

It was a sense of escalation.

That the stakes were higher now. a me.

I stood in the doorway. It was Ruth who acknowledged "Hello, David," she said quietly.

“Sit down.Join us.”

Then she sighed.

“Somebody get me a beer, will you?”~}

“ E

Willie got up in the dining room and went into the kitchen, got a beer for her and one for himself, opened them and handed one to her.Then he sat down again, fl Ruth lit a.cigarette.I I looked at Meg sitting in a folding chair in front of the blank gray eye of the television. She looked scared but determined.I thought of Gary Cooper walking out onto the silent street at the end of High Noon.

“Well now,” said Ruth.

“Well now.”

She sipped the beer, smoked the cigarette.

Woofer squirmed on the couch.

I almost turned and went out again.

Then Donny got up in the dining room.He walked “” over to Meg.He stood there in front of her.-| | “You brought a cop here after my mom,” he said., “After my mother.”Meg looked up at him.Her face relaxed a little.It was Donny, after all.Reluctant Donny.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I just had to be sure it wouldn’t...”

His hand shot up and slashed across her face.

“Shut up!Shut up, yo !”

His hand was poised in front of her, ready, trembling.

It looked like it was all he could do not to hit her again and a whole lot harder this time.

She stared at him, aghast.

“Sit down,” Ruth said quietly.

It was like he hadn’t heard her.

“Sit down!”

He pulled himself away. His about-face was practically military. He stalked back into the dining room.

Then there was a silence again.

Finally Ruth leaned forward.

“What I want to know is this. What did you think, Meggy? What went through your mind?”

Meg didn’t answer.

Ruth started coughing. That deep, hacking cough she had. Then she got control.

“What I mean to say is, did you think he was gonna take you away or something? You and Susan? Get you out of here?”

“Well I’ll tell you it’s not gonna happen. He’s not gonna take you anywhere, girly. Because he doesn’t care to. If he’d cared to he’d have done it on the spot back at the fireworks and he didn’t, did he?”

“So what’s left? What’d you have in mind?”

“You think maybe I’d be scared of him?”

Meg just sat there, arms folded, with that determined look in her eyes.

Ruth smiled, sipped her beer.

And she looked determined too in her way.

“Problem is,” she said, “what do we do now? There’s nothing about that man or any other man that scares me, Meggy. If you didn’t know that before then I sure

hope you know it now. But I can't have you running to the cops every ten, twenty minutes either. So the question is, what now? | "I'd send you someplace if there was someplace to send you. Believe me I would. Damned if I need some stupid little whore out ruinin' my reputation. And God knows they don't pay me enough to bother trying to correct you. Hell, with what they pay it's a wonder I can even feed you!" <1

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She sighed.

"I guess I got to think about this," she said. Then she got to her feet and walked into the kitchen.

She opened the refrigerator.

"You get to your room. Susie too. And stay there."

She reached for a beer and then laughed.

"Before Donny gets to thinking he might come over and smack you again."

She opened the can of Budweiser.

Meg took her sister's arm and led her into the bedroom.

"You too, David," said Ruth.

"You better get on home. Sorry. But I got some difficult thinking to do."

"That's okay."

"You want a Coke or something for the road?"

I smiled. For the road. I was right next door.

"No, that's okay."

"Want me to sneak you a beer?"

She had that old mischievous twinkle in her eye. The tension dissolved. I laughed.

“That’d be cool.”

She tossed me one.I caught it.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” she said and this time all of us laughed, because don’t mention it was a code between us.

It was always what she said to us kids when she was letting us do something our parents wouldn’t want us to do or let us do in our own houses.Don’t mention it.

“I won’t,” I said.

I stuffed the can into my shirt and went outside.

When I got back to my house Linda was curled up in front of the TV set watching Edd Byrnes comb his hair during the opening credits of 77 Sunset Strip.She looked sort of glum.I guessed that Steve wasn’t showing up tonight.

“

“Night,” I said and went up to my room.

I drank the beer and thought of Meg.I wondered if I should try to help her somehow.There was a conflict here.I was still attracted to Meg and liked her but Donny and Ruth were much older friends.I wondered if she really even needed helping.Kids got slapped, after all.Kids got punched around.

I wondered where this was going.

What do we do now?said Ruth.

I stared at Meg’s watercolor on my wall and began to wonder about that too.

What Ruth decided was that, from then on, Meg was never allowed to leave the house alone.Either she was with her, or Donny or Willie. Mostly she didn’t leave at all.So that I never had a chance to ask Meg what she wanted done, if she wanted something done, never mind deciding whether I’d actually do it or not.

It was out of my hands.Or so I thought.

That was a relief to me.

If I felt that anything was lost—Meg’s confidence, or even just her company—I was never all that aware of it. I knew that things had taken a pretty unusual turn next door and I guess I was looking for some distance from it for a while, to sort things out for myself.

So I saw less than usual of the Chandlers for the next few days and that was a relief too. I hung around with Tony and Kenny and Denise and Cheryl, and even with Eddie now and then when it felt safe.

The street was buzzing with news of what was happening over there. Sooner or later every conversation came back to the Chandlers. What made it so incredible was that Meg had gotten the police involved. That was the revolutionary act, the one we couldn’t get over. Could you imagine turning in an adult—especially an adult who might just as well have been your mother—to the cops? It was practically unthinkable.

Yet it was also fraught with potential. You could see Eddie in particular stewing over the idea. Daydreaming about his father I guessed. A thoughtful Eddie was not something we were used to either. It added to the strangeness.

But apart from the business with the cops all anybody really knew—including me—was that people were getting punished a lot over there for seemingly little reason, but that was nothing new except that it was happening at the Chandlers’, which we’d all considered safe haven. That and the fact that Willie and Donny were participating. But even that didn’t strike us as too odd.

We had The Game as precedent.

No, mostly it was the cops. And it was Eddie who, after a while, had the final word on that subject.

“Well, it didn’t get her shit though, did it,” he said. i Thoughtful Eddie.

But it was true. And strangely enough, in the course of the week that followed our feelings slowly changed toward Meg as a result of that. From admiration at the sheer all-or nothing boldness of the act, at the very concept of challenging Ruth’s authority so completely and publicly, we drifted toward a kind of vague contempt for her. How could she be so dumb as to think a cop was going to side

with a kid against an adult, anyway? How could she fail to realize it was only going to make things worse? How could she have been so naive, so trusting, so God-and-apple-pie stupid?

The policeman is your friend. Horseshit. None of us would have done it. We knew better.

You could actually almost resent her for it. It was as though in failing with Mr. Jennings she had thrown in all our faces the very fact of just how powerless we were as kids.

Being “just a kid” took on a whole new depth of meaning, of ominous threat, that maybe we knew was there all along but we’d never had to think about before. Shit, they could dump us in a river if they wanted to. We were just kids. We were property. We belonged to our parents, body and soul. It meant we were doomed in the face of any real danger from the adult world and that meant hopelessness, and humiliation and anger.

It was as though in failing herself Meg had failed us as well.

So we turned that anger outward. Toward Meg.

I did too. Over just that couple of days I flicked a slow mental switch. I stopped worrying. I turned off on her entirely.

Fuck it, I thought. Let it go where it goes.

The day I finally did go over and knock on the door nobody answered, but standing on the porch I was aware of two things. One was Susan crying in her room loud enough to hear her through the screen. The other was downstairs. A scuffling. Furniture scraping roughly across the floor. Muffled voices. Grunts, groans. A whole rancid danger in the air.

The shit, as they say, was hitting the fan.

It’s amazing to me now how eager I was to get down there.

I took the stairs two at a time and turned the corner.

I knew where they were.

At the doorway to the shelter Ruth stood watching. She smiled and moved aside to let me by.

“She tried to run away,” she said.

“But Willie stopped her.”

They were stopping her now all right, all of them, Willie and Woofer and Donny all together, going at her like a tackle dummy against the concrete wall, taking turns, smashing into her stomach. She was already long past arguing about it. All you heard was the whoosh of breath as Donny hit her and drove her tightly folded arms into her belly. Her mouth was set, grim. A hard concentration in her eyes.

“

And for a moment she was the heroine again. Battling the odds. But just for a moment. Because suddenly it was clear to me again that all she could do was take it, powerless. And lose. I And I remember thinking at least it's not me.

If I wanted to I could even join them. fl job For that moment, thinking that, I had power.

I've asked myself since, when did it happen? when was I, yes, corrupted? and I keep coming back to exactly this moment, these thoughts.

That sense of power, It didn't occur to me to consider that this was only a power granted to me by Ruth, and perhaps only temporary.

At the time it was quite real enough. As I watched, the distance between Meg and me seemed suddenly huge, insurmountable. It was not that my sympathies toward her stopped. But for the first time I saw her as essentially other than me. She was vulnerable. I wasn't. My position was favored here. Hers was as low as it could be. Was this inevitable, maybe? I remembered her asking me, why do they hate me? and I didn't believe it then, I didn't have any answer for her. Had I missed something? Was there maybe some flaw in her I hadn't seen that predetermined all of this? For the first time I felt that maybe Meg's separation from us might be justified.

I wanted to feel it was justified.

I say that now in deepest shame.

Because it seems to me now that so much of this was strictly personal, part of the nature of the world as I saw it.

I've tried to think that it was all the fault of my parents' warfare, of the cold blank calm I developed in the center of their constant hurricane. But I don't quite believe that anymore. I doubt I ever did entirely. My parents loved me, in many ways better than I deserved—however they felt about one another. And I knew that. For almost anyone that would have been enough to eliminate any appetite for this whatsoever.

No. The truth is that it was me. That I'd been waiting for this, or something like this, to happen all along. It was as though something starkly elemental were at my back, sweeping through me, releasing and becoming me, some wild black wind of my own making on that beautiful bright sunny day.

And I ask myself: Whom did I hate? Whom and what did I fear?

In the basement, with Ruth, I began to learn that anger, hate, fear and loneliness are all one button awaiting the touch of just a single finger to set them blazing toward destruction.

And I learned that they can taste like winning.

I watched Willie step back. For once he didn't look clumsy. His shoulder caught her squarely in the stomach, lifted her off her feet.

I suppose her only hope was that one of them would miss and smash his head against the wall. But nobody was going to. She was tiring. There was nowhere to maneuver, no where to go. Nothing to do but take it till she fell. And that would be soon now. Woofer got a running start. She had to bend her knees in order not to take it in the groin.

"Cry, goddammit!" Willie yelled. Like the others he was breathing hard. He turned to me.

"She won't cry," he said.

"She don't care," said Woofer.

“She’ll cry,” said Willie.

“I’ll make her.”

“Too much pride,” said Ruth behind me.

“Pride goeth before a fall. You ought to all remember that. Pride falls.” | Donny rammed at her.

Football was his game. Her head snapped back against the cinder block. Her arms fell open. The look in her eyes was glazed now., She slid a few inches down the wall.

Then she stopped and held there.

Ruth sighed.

“That’ll be enough for now, boys,” she said.

“You’re not going to get her to cry. Not this time.”

She held out her arm, beckoning.

“Come on.”

You could see they weren’t done yet. But Ruth sounded bored and final.

Then Willie muttered something about stupid whores, and one by one they filed past us.

I was last to leave. It was hard to take my eyes away.

That this could happen.

I watched her slide down the wall to squat on the cold concrete floor.

I’m not sure she was ever aware of me.

“Let’s go,” said Ruth.

She closed the metal door and bolted it shut behind me.

Meg was left in there in the dark. Behind the door to a meat locker.

We went upstairs and poured some Cokes. Ruth got out cheddar cheese and crackers. We sat around the dining room table.

I could still hear Susan crying in the bedroom, softer now. Then Willie got up and turned on the television and Truth or Consequences came on and you couldn't hear her anymore.

We watched for a while.

Ruth had a women's magazine open in front of her on the table. She was smoking a Tareyton, flipping through the magazine, drinking from her Coke bottle.

She came to a photo—a lipstick ad—and stopped.

"I don't see it," she said.

"The woman's ordinary.

You see it?"

She held up the magazine.

Willie looked and shrugged and bit into a cracker. But I thought the woman was pretty. About Ruth's age, maybe a little younger, but pretty.

Ruth shook her head.

"I see her everywhere I look," she said, "I swear it.

Everywhere. Name's Suzy Parker. Big model. And I just don't see it. A redhead. Maybe that's it. Men like the redheads. But hell, Meg's got red hair. And Meg's hair's prettier than that, doncha think?"

I looked at the picture again. I agreed with her.

"I just don't see it," she said, frowning.

"Meg's definitely prettier than that. A whole lot prettier." | "Sure she is," said Donny. I "World's crazy," said Ruth.

“It just don’t make any sense to me at all.”

She cut a slice of cheese and placed it on a cracker.

Talk your mom to let you sleep over at my house tonight,” said Donny.

“There’s

B something I want to talk to you about.“

We were standing at the bridge on Maple skimming stones down into the water. The brook was clear and sluggish.

“What’s wrong with talking now?”

“Nothing.”

But he didn’t say what was on his mind.

I don’t know why I resisted the idea of sleeping over.

Maybe it was knowing I’d get more involved with them somehow. Or maybe it was just that I knew what my mom would say—there were girls at the Chandlers’ these days, and staying over there would not seem so clear-cut to her anymore.

She should only know, I thought.

“Willie wants to talk to you too,” said Donny.

“Willie does?”

“Yeah.”

I laughed. The notion of Willie having something on his mind worth actually speaking about.

I Actually it was intriguing.

i* “Well in that case I guess I’ll just have to, then, won’t I,” I said.

Donny laughed too, and skimmed a long one three skips down across the dappling bands of sunlight.

My mother wasn’t happy.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“Mom, I sleep there all the time.”

“Not lately you don’t.”

“You mean since Meg and Susan?”

“That’s right.”

“Look.It’s no big deal.It’s the same as before.The guys get the bunk beds and Meg and Susan are in Ruth’s room.”

“Mrs.Chandler’s room.”

“Right.Mrs.Chandler’s room.”

“So where is Mrs.Chandler?”

“On the couch.On the pullout in the living room.

What’s the big deal?“

“You know what’s the big deal.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes you do.”

o I don’t.“

“What?”said my father, walking into the kitchen from the living room.

“What big deal is that?”

“He wants to stay over there again,” said my mother.

She was snapping green beans into a colander.

“What?Over there?”

“Yes.”

“So let him.”He sat down at the kitchen table and opened up his newspaper.

“Robert, there are two young girls there now.”

“So?”

She sighed.

“Please,” she said.

“Please don’t be dense, Robert.”

“Dense, hell,” said my father.

“Let him.Is there any coffee?”

“Yes,” she said.She sighed again and brushed her hands off on her apron.

I got up and got to the coffeepot ahead of her and turned on the flame beneath it.She looked at me and then went back to the beans.

“Thanks, dad,” I said.fm “I didn’t say you could go,” said my mother.

I smiled.

“You didn’t say I couldn’t, either.”

She looked at my father and shook her head.

“Dammit, Robert,” she said.

“Right,” said my father. And then he read his paper. H

He told her about The Game,” said Donny.

“Who?”

“Ruth. My mom. Who else, shit-for brains

Donny was alone in the kitchen when I came in, making a peanut butter sandwich that I guess was dinner that night.

There were smears of peanut butter and grape jelly and bread crumbs on the counter. Just for fun I counted the sets of silverware in the drawer. There were still only five.

“You told her?”

He nodded.

“Woofers did.”

He took a bite of the sandwich and sat down at the dining-room table. I sat across from him. There was a half-finished cigarette burn in the wood I hadn't seen before.

“Jesus. What'd she say?”

“Nothing. It was weird. It was like she knew, you know?”

“Knew? Knew what?”

“Everything. Like it was no sweat. Like she figured we were doing it all along. Like every kid did.”

“You're kidding.”

“No. I swear.”

“Bullshit.”

“I'm telling you. All she wanted to know was who was with us so I told her.”

“You told her?Me?Eddie?Everybody” | “Like I said she didn’t care. Hey.Would you please not blow your cool on this, Davy?It didn’t bother her.”

“I

“Denise?You told her about Denise too?”|| “Yeah.Everything.”| “You said she was naked?”

“~

I couldn’t believe it.I’d always thought that Willie was the stupid one.I watched him eat the sandwich.He smiled at me and shook his head.“I’m telling you.You don’t have to worry about it,” he said.

“Donny.”

“Really.”

“Donny.”

“Yes, Davy.”

“Are you nuts’!”

“No, Davy.”

“Do you realize for a goddamn second what would happen to me if... ”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you, for God’s sake.

Will you stop being such a friggin’ queer about it?It’s my mom, for God’s sake.Remember?“

“Oh that makes me feel just fine.Your mom knows we tie naked little girls to trees.Great.”| He sighed.

“David, if I’d known you were gonna be such an amazing retard about it I wouldn’t of told you.”| “Fw the retard, right?”

“Yeah.”He was pissed now.He popped the last gooey corner of the sandwich into his mouth.He stood up.

“Look, jerk. What do you think is going on in the shelter right now? Right this minute?”

I just looked at him. How did I know? Who cared?

Then it dawned on me. Meg was there.

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. He went to the refrigerator for a Coke.

“Bullshit.”

He laughed.

“Will you stop saying bullshit? Look, don’t believe me. Go take a look. Hell, I just came up for a sandwich.”

I ran downstairs. I could hear him laughing behind me.

It was getting dark outside so the basement lights were on, naked bulbs over the washer dryer and under the stairs and over the sump pump in the corner.

Willie was standing behind Ruth at the door to the shelter.

They both had flashlights in their hands.

Ruth lit hers and waved it at me once like a cop at a roadblock.

“Here’s Davy,” she said.

Willie gave me a glance. Who gives a shit.

My mouth was open. It felt dry. I licked my lips. I nodded to Ruth and looked around the corner through the doorway.

And it was hard to comprehend at first—1 guess because maybe it was out of context, and probably because it was Meg, and definitely because Ruth was there. It felt dreamlike—or like some game you play on Halloween when everyone is in costume and nobody’s quite recognizable themselves even though you know who they are. Then Donny came downstairs and slapped his hand

down on my shoulder.

He offered me the Coke.J “See?”he said.

“I told you.”| I did see.

They’d taken ten-penny nails and driven them into the beams Willie Sr. had lain along the ceiling—two nails, about three feet apart.J| They’d cut two lengths of clothesline and tied Meg’s wrists and looped a line over each of the nails and then run the lines down to the legs of the heavy worktable, tying them off down there rather than up at the nail so that they could be adjusted, tightened, just by untying each one and pulling it around the loop and then tying it tighter again.

Meg was standing on a small pile of books—three thick red volumes of the World Book Encyclopedia.

She was gagged and blindfolded.

Her feet were bare.Her shorts and short-sleeve blouse were dirty.In the space between the two, stretched out as she was, you could see her navel.

Meg was an inny.| Woofer paced around in front of her running the beam of his flashlight up and down her body.

There was a bruise just under the blindfold on her left cheek.

Susan sat on a carton of canned vegetables, watching.

A blue strand of ribbon made a bow in her hair.

Off in the corner I could see a pile of blankets and an air mattress. I realized Meg had been sleeping there.I wondered far how long.

“We’re all here,” said Ruth.

A dim amber light bled in from the rest of the basement but mostly it was just Woofer’s beam in there and the shadows moved erratically along with him when he moved, making things look strange and fluid and ghostly.The wire mesh over the single high window seemed to shift back and forth by subtle inches.The two four-by-four wooden posts supporting the ceiling slid across the room at odd

angles. The ax, pick, crowbar and shovel stacked in the corner opposite Meg's bed appeared to switch positions with one another, looming and shrinking as you watched, shape shifting. The fallen fire extinguisher crawled across the floor.

But it was Meg's own shadow that dominated the room—head back, arms wide apart, swaying. It was an image straight out of all our horror comics, out of *The Black Cat* with Lugosi and Karloff, out of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, out of every cheap twenty-five-cent paperback historical thriller about the Inquisition ever written. Most of which I figured we'd collected.

It was easy to imagine torchlight, strange instruments and processions, braziers full of hot coals.

I shivered. Not at the chill but at the potential.

"The Game is she's got to tell," said Woofer.

"Okay. Tell what?" Ruth asked.

"Tell anything. Something secret."

Ruth nodded, smiling.

"Sounds right. Only how's she a going to do that with the gag on?"

"You don't want her to tell right away, Mom," said Willie.

"Anyway, you always know when they're ready."|| "You sure? You want to tell, Meggy?" said Ruth.

"You ready?"|| "She's not ready," insisted Woofer. But he needn't have bothered. Meg didn't make a sound.

"So now what?" Ruth asked.

Willie pushed off from the doorjamb where he was leaning and ambled into the room.

"Now we take a book away," he said..m M He bent over, pulled out the middle one and stepped back. The ropes were tighter now.|| Willie and Woofer both had

their flashlights on.

Ruth's was still at her side, unlit.

I could see some red around Meg's wrists from the pull of the ropes. Her back arched slightly. The short-sleeve shirt rode up. She was only just able to stand with her feet down flat on the two remaining books and I could already see the strain in her calves and thighs. She went up on her toes for a moment to take the pressure off her wrists and then sank down again. "," Willie switched off his flashlight. It was spookier that way..

"H

Meg just hung there, swaying slightly.⁹ "Confess," said Woofer. Then he laughed.

"No.

Don't," he said.

"Do another book," said Donny.

I glanced at Susan to see how she was taking this. She was sitting with her hands folded in the lap of her dress and her face looked very serious and she was staring intently at Meg but there was no way to read what she was thinking or feeling at all.

Willie bent down and pulled out the book.

She was up on the balls of her feet now.

Still she made no sound.

The muscles of her legs defined themselves sharply against her skin.

"Let's see how long she can go like that," said Donny.

"It's gonna hurt after a while."

"Nah," said Woofer.

“It’s still too easy.Let’s do the last one.Get ‘er up on her tiptoes.”

“I want to watch her a while.See what happens.”

But the fact was that nothing was happening.Meg seemed determined to tough this out.And she was strong.

“Don’t you want to give her a chance to confess?Isn’t that the idea?” asked Ruth.

“Nah,” said Woofer.

“Still too soon.C’mon.This is no good.Take the other book, Will.”

Willie did.

And then Meg did make some kind of sound behind the gag, just once, a sort of tiny exhaled groan as all at once just breathing became harder. Her blouse pulled up to right beneath her breasts and I could see her belly rise and fall in an irregular labored rhythm against her rib cage.Her head fell back for a moment and then came forward again.

Her balance was precarious.She began to sway.

Her face flushed.Her muscles strained with tension.

We watched, silent.

She was beautiful.

The vocal sounds that accompanied her breathing were coming more frequently now as the strain increased.She couldn’t help it.Her legs began to tremble.First the calves and then the thighs.

A thin sheen of sweat formed over her ribs, glistened on her thighs.

“We should strip her,” Donny said.

The words just hung there for a moment, suspended as Meg was suspended, tipping a balance that was every bit as precarious.

Suddenly it was me who felt dizzy.

“Yeah,” said Woofer.

Meg had heard. She shook her head. There was indignation, anger and fear there. Sounds came from behind the gag. No. No. No.

“Shut up,” said Willie. She started trying to jump, pulling on the ropes, trying to throw them off the nails, squirming. But all she was doing was hurting herself, chafing her wrists.

She didn’t seem to care. She wasn’t going to let it happen.

She kept trying... No. No. and Willie walked over and thumped her on the head with the book.

She slumped back, stunned.

I looked at Susan. Her hands were still clasped together in her lap but the knuckles were white now. She looked directly at her sister, not at us. Her teeth were biting hard and steadily at her lower lip.

I couldn’t watch her.

I cleared my throat and found something like a voice.

“Hey, uh... guys... listen, I don’t really think...”

Woofer whirled on me.

“We’ve got permission” he screamed.

“We do! I say we take off her clothes! I say strip her!”

We looked at Ruth.

She stood leaning in the doorway, her arms folded close into her belly.

There was something keyed tight about her, like she was angry or doing some hard thinking. Her lips pressed together in a characteristic straight thin line.

Her eyes never left Meg’s body.

Then finally she shrugged.

“That’s The Game, isn’t it?”she said.

Compared with the rest of the house and even the basement it was cool down there but now, suddenly, it didn’t feel cool. Instead there was a growing filmy closeness in the room, a sense of filling up, a thickening, a slow electric heat that seemed to rise from each of us filling and charging the air, surrounding us, isolating us, yet somehow mingling us all together too. You could see it in the way Willie stood leaning forward, the World Book clutched in his hand. In the way Woofer edged closer, the beam of his flashlight less erratic now, lingering, caressing Meg’s face, her legs, her stomach. I could feel it from Donny and Ruth beside me, seeping in and over and through me like some sweet poison, a quiet knowledge shared.

We were going to do this. We were going to do this thing.

Ruth lit a cigarette and threw the match on the floor.

“Go ahead,” she said.

Her smoke curled into the shelter.

“Who gets to do it?”said Woofer.

“I do,” said Donny.

He stepped past me. Both Woofer and Willie had their flashlights on her now. I could see Donny dig into his pocket and bring out the pocketknife he always carried there. He turned to Ruth.

“You care about the clothes, Ma?”he asked.

She looked at him.

“I won’t have to do the shorts or anything,” he said.

“But...”

He was right. The only way he was going to get the blouse off her was to rip or

cut it off.

“No,” said Ruth.

“I don’t care.”j “Let’s see what she’s got,” said Willie.

Woofers laughed.I Donny approached her, folding out the blade.

“Don’t start anything,” he said.

“I won’t hurt you.

But if you start something we’ll just have to hit you again.

You know?It’s stupid.“

He unbuttoned the blouse carefully, pulling it away from her body as though shy of touching her.His face was red.His fingers were awkward.He was trembling.

She started to struggle but then I guess thought better of it.

Unbuttoned, the blouse hung shapeless over her.I could see she wore a white cotton bra underneath.For some reason that surprised me. Ruth never wore a bra.I guess I’d assumed Meg wouldn’t either.

Donny reached over with the penknife and cut through the left sleeve up to the neckline.He had to saw through the seam.But he’d kept the blade sharp.The blouse fell away behind her.

Meg began to cry.

He walked over to the other side and cut through the right sleeve the same way.Then he jerked the seam apart, a quick tearing sound.Then he stepped back.

“Shorts,” said Willie.

You could hear her crying softly and trying to say something behind the gag.No.Please.

“Don’t kick,” said Donny.

The shorts zipped halfway down the side. He unzipped them and tugged them down over her hips, adjusting the thin white panties upward as he did so, then slid the shorts down over her legs to the floor. The leg muscles jerked and trembled.

He stepped away from her again and looked at her.

We all did.

We'd seen Meg wearing just as little I suppose. She had a two-piece bathing suit. Everybody did that year. Even little kids. And we'd seen her wearing that.

But this was different. A bra and panties were private and only other girls were supposed to see them and the only other girls in the room were Ruth and Susan. And Ruth was allowing this. Encouraging it. The thought was too large to consider for long. Besides, here was Meg right in front of us. In front of our very eyes. The senses overwhelmed all thought, all a consideration.

"You confess yet, Meggy?" Ruth's voice was soft.

She shook her head yes. An enthusiastic yes.

"No she don't," said Willie.

"No way." A sheen of greasy sweat rolled off his flattop down across his forehead.

He wiped it off.

We all were sweating now. Meg most of all. Droplets glistened in her armpits, in her navel, across her belly.

"Do the rest," said Willie.

"Then maybe we'll let her confess."

Woofers giggled.

"Right after we let her do the hoochykoo," he said.

Donny stepped forward. He cut the right strap of her bra and then the left. Meg's breasts slid upward slightly, straining free of the cups. He could have unsnapped it from the back then but instead he walked around in front of her; He slid the blade beneath the thin white band between the cups and started sawing.

Meg was sobbing, It must have hurt to cry like that because every time her body moved the ropes were there, pulling at her. The knife was sharp but it took a

little while. Then there was a tiny pop and the bra fell away. Her breasts were bare.

They were whiter than the rest of her, pale and perfect and lovely. They shuddered with her crying. The nipples were pinkish brown and—to me—startlingly long, almost flat at the tips. Tiny plateaus of flesh. A form I'd never seen before and wanted instantly to touch.

I'd stepped farther into the room. Ruth was completely behind me now.

I could hear myself breathing.

Donny knelt in front of her and reached up. For a moment it looked like adoration, like worship.

Then his fingers hooked into the panties and drew them down over her hips, down her legs. He took his time.

Then that was another shock.

Meg's hair.

A small tuft of pale blond-orange down in which droplets of sweat gleamed.

I saw tiny freckles on her upper thighs.

I saw the small fold of flesh half hidden between her legs.

I studied her. Her breasts. How would they feel to touch?

Her flesh was unimaginable to me. The hair between her legs. I knew it would be soft. Softer than mine. I wanted to touch her. Her body would be hot. It trembled uncontrollably.

Her belly, her thighs, her strong pale white ass.

The stew of sex ripened, thickened in me.

The room reeked of sex.

I felt a hard weight between my legs. I moved forward, fascinated. I stepped past

Susan.I saw Woofer's face, pale and bloodless as he watched.I saw Willie's eyes riveted to that tuft of down.J Meg had stopped crying now.j I turned to glance at Ruth. And she'd moved forward too, was standing inside the doorway now.I saw her left hand move against her right breast, the fingers gently closing, and then fall away.

Donny knelt beneath her, looking up.

"Confess, "he said.

Her body began to spasm.

I could smell her sweat.

She nodded.She had to nod.

It was surrender.

"Get the ropes," he said to Willie.

Willie went to the table and untied the ropes, let out some slack until her feet came down flat on the bare cement floor, then tied them off again.| Her head fell forward with relief.J Donny stood up and removed the gag.I realized it was Ruth's yellow kerchief.Then she opened her mouth and he pulled out the rag they'd wadded up and stuffed in there.He threw the rag on the floor and put the kerchief in the back pocket of his jeans.A corner hung out slightly.For a moment he looked like a farmer.

"Could you... ?My arms..."she said.

"My shoulders... they hurt."

"No," said Donny.

"That's it.That's all you get."

"Confess," said Woofer.

"Tell us how you play with yourself," said Willie.

"I

bet you put your finger in, doncha?”

“No. Tell us about the syph.” Woofer laughed.

“Yeah, the clap,” said Willie, grinning.

“Cry,” said Woofer.

“I already did cry,” said Meg. And you could see she’d got a little bit of the old tough defiance back now that she wasn’t hurting quite so much anymore.

Woofer just shrugged.

“So cry again,” he said.

Meg said nothing.

I noticed that her nipples had gone softer now, a smooth silky-looking shiny pink.

God! She was beautiful.

It was as though she read my mind.

“Is David here?” she said.

Willie and Donny looked at me. I couldn’t answer.

“He’s here,” said Willie.

“David...” she said. But then I guess she couldn’t finish. She didn’t need to, though. I knew by the way she said it.

She didn’t want me there.

I knew why too. And knowing why shamed me just as she’d shamed me before. But I couldn’t leave. The others were there. Besides, I didn’t want to. I wanted to see. I needed to see. Shame looked square in the face of desire and looked away again.

“And Susan?”

“Yeah.Her too,” said Donny.

“Oh God.”

“Screw that,” said Woofer.

“Who cares about Susan?

Where’s the confession?”

And now Meg sounded weary and adult.

“Confession’s stupid,” she said.

“There’s no confession.”

It stopped us.H “We could haul you right on up again,” said Willie.

“I know that.”

“We could whip you,” said Woofer.

Meg shook her head.

“Please.Just leave me alone.

Leave me be.There’s no confession.“

And the thing was that nobody really expected that.

For a moment we all just stood around waiting for somebody to say something, something that would convince her to play The Game the way it was supposed to be played.Or force her.Or maybe for Willie to haul her back again like he’d said.Anything that would keep it going further.| But in just those few moments something was gone.To get it back we’d have to start all over again.I think we all knew it. The sweet heady feeling of danger had suddenly slipped away.It had gone as soon as she started talking, i That was the key.j| Talking, it was Meg again.Not some beautiful naked victim, but Meg.A person with a mind, a voice to express her mind, and maybe even rights of her own.w Taking the gag off was a mistake, It left us feeling sullen and angry and frustrated.So we stood there.v- J It was Ruth who broke the silence, i “We could do that,” she said..

“Do what?”asked Willie.a “Do what she says.Leave her alone.Let her think about it awhile.That seems fine to me.”

We thought about it.

“Yeah,” said Woofer.

“Leave her alone.In the dark.

Just hanging there.“

It was one way, I thought, to start over.

Willie shrugged.

Donny looked at Meg.I could see he didn’t want to leave.He looked at her hard.

He raised his hand.Slowly, hesitantly, he moved it toward her breasts.

And suddenly it was like I was part of him.I could feel my own hand there, the fingers nearly touching her.I could almost feel the slick moist heat of her skin.

“Unh-unh,” said Ruth.

“No.”

Donny looked at her.Then he stopped.Just inches from her breast.

I took a breath.

“Don’t you touch that girl,” said Ruth.

“I don’t want any of you touching her.”

He dropped his hand.

“Girl like her,” said Ruth, “isn’t even clean.You keep your hands off her.You hear?”

We heard.

“Yeah, Ma,” Donny said.

She turned to go. She stomped out her cigarette butt on the floor and waved to us.

“C’mon,” she said.

“But first you better gag her again.”

I looked at Donny, who was looking at the rag on the floor.

“It’s dirty,” he said.

“Not that dirty,” said Ruth.

“I don’t want her screaming at us all night. Put it in.”

Then she turned to Meg.

“You want to think about one thing, girl,” she said.

“Well, two things exactly. First that it could be your little sister and not you hanging there. And second that I know some of the things you’ve done wrong. And I’m interested to hear them. So maybe this confessing isn’t such a kid’s game after all. I can hear it from the one of you or I can hear it from the other. You think about that,” she said, and turned and walked away.

We listened to her climb the stairs.

Donny gagged her.

He could have touched her then but he didn’t.

It was like Ruth was still in the room, watching. A presence that was a whole lot more than the lingering smell of her smoke in the air yet just as insubstantial. Like Ruth was a ghost who haunted us, her sons and me. Who’d haunt us forever if we pushed or disobeyed her. And I think I realized then the sharp razor edge she’d honed to her permission.

The show was Ruth’s and Ruth’s only.

The Game was nonexistent.

And by that reckoning it was not just Meg but all of us stripped and naked, hanging there.

Lying in bed, we were haunted by Meg. We couldn't sleep.

Time would pass in total silence in the warm dark and then somebody'd say something, how she looked when Willie took the last book away, what it must feel like to stand there so long with your hands tied over your head, whether it hurt, what it was like to finally see a girl's naked body, and we'd talk about that a while until moments later we got quiet again as each of us wrapped himself up in his own little cocoon of thought and dreams.

But there was only one object to these dreams. Meg.

Meg as we'd left her.

And finally we had to see her again.

Donny'd no sooner suggested it than we saw the risks involved. Ruth had told us to leave her alone. The house was small and sounds carried, and Ruth slept one thin door away, in Susan's room—was Susan lying awake like us? thinking of her sister?—directly above the shelter. If Ruth awoke and caught us the unthinkable might happen—she might exclude us all in the future.

We already knew there'd be a future.

But the images we remembered were too strong. It was almost as though we needed confirmation to believe we'd D 203 d

really been there. Meg's nudity and accessibility were like a siren's song. They absolutely beckoned.

We had to risk it.

The night was moonless, black.

Donny and I climbed off the top bunks. Willie and Woofer slid out beneath.

Ruth's door was closed.

We tiptoed past. For once Woofer resisted the urge to giggle, Willie lifted one of the flashlights off the kitchen table and Donny eased open the cellar door.

The stairs squeaked. There was nothing to do about it except pray and hope for luck.

The shelter door squeaked too but not so badly. We opened it and went inside, standing barefoot on the cold concrete floor the same as she was—and there was Meg, exactly as we remembered as though no time at all had passed, exactly as we'd pictured her. Well, not quite.

Her hands were white, splotched with red and blue.

And even in the flashlight's thin uneven light you could see how pale her body was. She was all gooseflesh, nipples puckered up brown and tight.

She heard us come in and made a soft whiny sound.

"Quiet," whispered Donny.

She obeyed.

We watched her. It was like standing in front of some sort of shrine—or like watching some strange exotic animal in a zoo.

Possibly not. Possibly it would have happened anyway. The inevitable punishment of the outsider.

But it seems to me more likely that it was precisely because she was beautiful and strong, and we were not, that Ruth and the rest of us had done this to her. To make a sort of judgment on that beauty, on what it meant and didn't mean to us.

"I bet she'd like some water," said Woofer.

She shook her head. Yes. Oh yes please.

"If we give her water we got to take off the gag," said Willie.

"So what? She won't make noise."

He stepped forward.

“You won’t make any noise, will ya, Meg? We can’t wake Mom.”

No. She shook her head firmly side to side. You could tell she wanted that water a lot.

“You trust her?” Willie said.

Donny shrugged.

“If she makes any noise then she gets in trouble too. She’s not stupid. So give it to her. Why not?”

“I’ll get it,” said Woofer.

There was a sink beside the washer dryer. Woofer turned it on and we could hear it lightly running behind us.

He was being unusually quiet about it.

Unusually nice, too, for Woofer.

Willie untied the gag just as he’d done earlier and pulled the dirty wad of rag out of her mouth. She moaned and began to work her jaw side to side.

Woofer came back with an old glass fruit jar full of water.

“I found it by the paint cans,” he said.

“It don’t smell too bad.” If Donny took it from him and tilted it to Meg’s lips. She drank hungrily, making small glad noises in her throat every time she swallowed. She drained the jar in no time.

“Oh God,” she said.

“Oh God. Thank you.” And it was a weird feeling. Like everything was forgiven. Like she was really grateful to us.

It was amazing in a way. That just one jar of water could do that..

I thought again how helpless she was. a | “a ill And I wondered if the others were feeling what I was feeling—this overwhelming, almost dizzying need to touch her. To put my hands on her. To see exactly what she felt like. Breasts, buttocks, thighs. That blond-red curly tuft between her legs.

Exactly what we weren’t supposed to do.

It made me feel like fainting. The push and pull. It was that strong.

“Want some more?” said Woofer.

“Could I? Please?”

He ran out to the sink and then back again with another jarful. He gave it to Donny and she drank that too.

“Thanks. Thank you.”

She licked her lips. They were chapped, dry, split in places.

“Do you... do you think you could...? The ropes... they hurt me a lot.”

And you could see they did. Even though her feet were flat on the floor she was still stretched tight.

Willie looked at Donny.

Then they both looked back at me.

I felt confused for a moment. Why should they care what I thought? It was like there was something they were looking for from me and they weren’t sure that they’d find it.

Anyway, I nodded.

“I guess we could,” said Donny.

“A little. On one condition though.”

“Anything. What?”

“You have to promise not to fight.”

“Fight?”

“You have to promise not to make any noise or anything and you have to promise not to fight and not to tell anybody later on. Tell anybody anytime.”

“Tell what?”

“That we touched you.”

And there it was.

It was what we’d all been dreaming about in that bedroom upstairs. I shouldn’t have been surprised. But I was.

I could hardly breathe. I felt like everybody in the room could hear my heartbeat.

“Touched me?” said Meg.

Donny blushed deeply.

“You know.”

“Oh my God,” she said. She shook her head.

“Oh Jesus. Come on.”

She sighed. Then thought for a moment.

“No,” she said.

“We wouldn’t hurt you or anything,” said Donny.

“Just touch.”

“No.”

Like she’d weighed and considered it and simply couldn’t see her way clear to do that no matter what happened and that was her final say on the matter.

“Honest. We wouldn’t.”

“No. You’re not doing that to me. Any of you.”

She was mad now. But so was Donny.

“We could do it to you anyway, jerk-off. Who’s gonna stop us?”

“I am.”

“How?”

“Well you’ll only do it to me once goddamn you, and only one of you. Because I won’t just tell. I’ll scream.”

And there wasn’t any question but that she meant it.

She’d scream. She didn’t care.

She had us.

“Okay,” said Donny.

“Fine. Then we leave the ropes the way they are. We put the gag back on and that’s that.”

You could see she was close to tears. But she wasn’t giving in to him. Not on this. Her voice was bitter.

“All right,” she said.

“Gag me. Do it. Leave. Get out of here!”

“We will.”

He nodded to Willie and Willie stepped forward with the rag and scarf.

“Open up,” he said.

For a moment she hesitated. Then she opened her mouth. He put the rag in and tied the scarf around it. He tied it tighter than he had to, tighter than before.

“We still got a deal,” said Donny.

“You got some water. But we were never here. You understand me?”

She nodded. It was hard to be naked and hanging there and proud at the same time but she managed it.

You couldn’t help admiring her.

“Good,” he said. He turned to leave.

I had an idea.

I reached out and touched his arm as he passed and stopped him.

“Donny?”

“Yeah?”

“Look. Let’s give her some slack. Just a little. All we have to do is push the worktable up an inch or two. Ruth won’t notice. I mean, look at her. You want to dislocate a shoulder or something? Morning’s a long way off, you know what I mean?”

I said this in a voice loud enough so that she could hear.

He shrugged.

“We gave her a choice. She wasn’t interested.”

“I know that,” I said. And here I leaned forward and smiled at him and whispered.

“But she might be grateful,” I said.

“You know? She might remember. Next time.”

We pushed the table.

Actually we sort of lifted and pushed it so as not to make much noise and with the three of us and Woofer it wasn’t too hard. And when we were done she had

maybe an inch of slack, just enough to give her a bend at the elbow. It was more than she'd had in a very long while.

"See you," I whispered as I closed the door.

And in the dark I think she nodded.

I was a conspirator now, I thought. In two ways. On both sides.

I was working both sides from the middle. || What a great idea. -I was proud of myself, a I felt smart and virtuous and excited. I'd helped her.

One day would come the payoff. One day, I knew, she'd let me touch her. It would come to that. Maybe not the, others—but me. J She'd let me.

So "See you, Meg," I whispered.

Like she'd thank me.

I was out of my mind. I was crazy.

In the morning we came down and Ruth had untied her and brought her a change of clothes along with a cup of hot tea and some unbuttered white toast and she was drinking and eating that sitting cross-legged on the air mattress when we arrived.

Clothed, freed, with the gag and blindfold gone, there wasn't much mystery left in her. She looked pale, haggard.

Tired and distinctly grumpy. It was hard to remember the proud Meg or the suffering Meg of the day before.

You could see she was having trouble swallowing.

Ruth stood over her acting like a mother.

"Eat your toast," she said.

Meg looked up at her and then down at the paper plate in her lap.

We could hear the television upstairs—some game show. Willie shuffled his feet.

It was raining outside and we could hear that too.

She took a bite of the crust and then chewed forever until it must have been as thin as spit before swallowing.

Ruth sighed. It was as though watching Meg chew was this great big trial for her. She put her hands on her hips and with her legs apart she looked like George Reeves in the opening credits of Superman.

“Go on. Have some more,” she said.

Meg shook her head.

“It’s too... I can’t. My mouth is so dry. Could I just wait? Have it later? I’ll drink the tea.”

“I’m not wasting food, Meg. Food’s expensive. I made that toast for you.”

“I... I know. Only...”

“What do you want me to do? Throw it out?”

“No. Couldn’t you just leave it here? I’ll have it in a while.”

“It’ll be hard by then. You should eat it now. While it’s fresh. It’ll bring bugs. Roaches. Ants. I’m not having bugs in my house.”

Which was kind of funny because there already were a couple of flies buzzing around in there.

“I’ll eat it real soon, Ruth. I promise.”

Ruth seemed to think about it. She adjusted her stance, brought her feet together, folded her arms across her breasts.

“Meg honey,” she said, “I want you to try to eat it now. It’s good for you.”

“I know it is. Only it’s hard for me now. I’ll drink the tea, okay?” | She raised the mug to her lips. | “It’s not supposed to be easy,” said Ruth.

“Nobody said it was easy.” She laughed.

“You’re a woman, Meg. That’s hard—not easy.”

Meg looked up at her and nodded and drank steadily at the tea.

Donny and Woofer and Willie and I stood in our pajamas and watched from the doorway.

I was getting a little hungry myself. But neither Ruth nor Meg had acknowledged us.

Ruth watched her and Meg kept her eyes on Ruth and drank, small careful sips because the tea was still steamy hot, and we could hear the wind and rain outside and then the sump pump kicking in for a while and stopping, and still Meg drank and Ruth just stared.

And then Meg looked down for a moment, breathing in the warm fragrant steam from the tea, enjoying it.

And Ruth exploded.

She whacked the mug from her hands. It shattered against the whitewashed cinder-block wall. Tea running down, the color of urine.

Eat it!”

She stabbed her finger at the toast. It had slipped halfway off the paper plate.

Meg held up her hands.

“Okay! All right! I will! I’ll eat it right away! All right?”

Ruth leaned down to her so that they were almost nose to nose and Meg couldn’t have taken a bite then if she’d wanted to—not without pushing the toast up into Ruth’s face.

Which wouldn’t have been a good idea. Because Ruth was burning mad.

“You fucked up Willie’s wall,” she said.

“Goddamn you, you broke my mug. You think mugs come cheap? You think tea’s cheap‘!”

“I’m sorry.” She picked up the toast but Ruth was still leaning in close.

“I’ll eat. All right? Ruth?”

“You fucking better.”

“I’m going to.”

“You fucked up Willie’s wall.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Who’s going to clean it? Who’s going to clean that wall?”

“I will. I’m sorry, Ruth. Really.”

“Fuck you, sister. You know who’s going to clean it?”

Meg didn’t answer. You could see she didn’t know what to say. Ruth just seemed to get madder and madder and nothing could calm her.

“Do you?”

no. Ruth stood up straight and bellowed.

“Su-san! Su-san! You come down here!”

Meg tried to stand. Ruth pushed her down again.

And this time the toast did fall off the plate to the floor, a Meg reached down to pick it up and got hold of the piece she’d been eating. But Ruth’s brown loafer came down on the other one.

“Forget it!” she said.

“You don’t want to eat, you don’t need to eat.”

She grabbed the paper plate. The remaining piece of toast went flying. If “You

think I should cook for you? You little bitch. H You little ingrate!”

Susan came hobbling down the stairs. You could hear her way before you saw her.

“Susan, you get in here!”

“Yes, Mrs. Chandler.”

We made way for her. She went past Woofer and he bowed and giggled.

“Shut up,” said Douny.

But she did look pretty dignified for a little girl, neatly dressed already and very careful how she walked and very serious-looking.

“Over to the table,” said Ruth.

She did as she was told.

“Turn around.”

She turned to face the table. Ruth glanced at Meg, and then slipped off her belt.

“Here’s how we clean the wall,” she said.

“We clean the wall by cleaning the slate.”

She turned to us.

“One of you boys come over here and pull up her dress and get rid of them panties.”

It was the first thing she’d said to us all morning.

Meg started to get up again but Ruth pushed her down hard a second time.

“We’re gonna make a rule,” she said.

“You disobey, you wise-mouth me, you sass me, anything like that, missy-and she pays for it. She gets the thrashing. And you get to watch. We’ll try that. And if

that doesn't work then we'll try something else."

She turned to Susan.

"You think that's fair, Suzie? That you should pay for your trash sister? For what she does?"

Susan was crying quietly.

"N... noooo," she moaned.

"Course not. I never said it was. Ralphie, you get over here and bare this girl's little butt for me. You other boys get hold of Meg, just in case she gets mean or stupid enough to walk into the line of fire here.

"She gives you any trouble, smack her. And careful where you touch her. She's probably got crabs or something.

God only knows where that cunt has been before we got her."

"Crabs?" said Woofer.

"Real crabs? "Never mind," said Ruth.

"Just do what I told you to do. You got all your life to learn about whores and crab lice."

And it went just like before, except that Meg was there. Except that the reasoning was crazy.

But by then we were used to that.

Woofer pulled her pants down over the casts and nobody even had to hold her this time while Ruth gave her twenty, fast, with no letup, while she screamed and howled as her ass got redder and redder in that close little room that Willie Sr. had built to withstand the Atomic Bomb—and at first Meg struggled when she heard the howling and crying and the sound of the belt coming down but Willie took her arm and twisted it behind her back, pressed her facedown into the air mattress so that she had all she could do to breathe, never mind helping, tears running down not just Susan's face but hers too and splotching the dirty

mattress while Donny and I stood watching and listening in our wrinkled pajamas.

When it was over Ruth stood back and slipped her belt through her belt loops and Susan bent over with difficulty, braces chattering, and pulled up her panties, then smoothed the back of the dress down over her.

Willie let go of Meg and stepped away.

As Susan turned toward us Meg lifted her head off the mattress and I watched their glances meet. I saw something pass between them. Something that seemed suddenly placid behind the tears, sad and oddly tranquil.

It unnerved me. I wondered if they weren't stronger than all of us after all.

And I was aware that once again this thing had escalated somehow.

Then Meg's eyes shifted to Ruth and I saw how.

Her eyes were savage.

Ruth saw it too and took an involuntary step back away from her. Her own eyes narrowed and ranged the room.

They fixed on the corner where the pick, ax, crowbar and shovel stood propped together like a little steel family of destruction.

Ruth smiled.

"I think Meg's pissed at us, boys," she said.

Meg said nothing.

"Well, we all know that won't get her anywhere at all.

But let's just pick up that stuff over there so she's not too tempted. She's maybe just dumb enough to try. So get 'em.

And lock the door behind you when you leave.

"By the way, Meggy," she said.

“You just passed on lunch and dinner. Have a real nice day.”

She turned and left the room.

We watched her go. Her walk was a little unsteady, I thought, almost like she'd been drinking though I knew that wasn't so.

“You want to tie her up again?” Woofer asked Willie.

“Try it,” said Meg.

Willie snorted.

“That's real cool, Meg,” he said.

“Act tough. We could do it whenever we want to and you know it.

And Susan's here. Remember that.”

Meg glared at him. He shrugged.

“Maybe later, Woof,” said Willie, and went and got the ax and shovel. Woofer took the pick and the crowbar and followed him.

And then there was a discussion as to where to put it all now that it was outside the protection of the shelter. The basement flooded sometimes so there was a danger of rusting.

Woofer wanted to hang them from the ceiling support beams.

Donny suggested they nail them to the wall. Willie said fuck it, put 'em by the boiler. Let 'em rust. Donny won and they went looking through Willie Sr.'s old World War II footlocker by the dryer, which served as a toolbox now, for hammer and nails.

I looked at Meg. I had to brace myself to do so. I guess I was expecting hate. Half dreading and half hoping it'd be there because then, at least, I'd know where I stood with her and with the rest of them. I could already see that playing the middle was going to be tough. But there wasn't any hate that I could see. Her eyes were steady. Sort of neutral.

“You could run away,” I said softly.

“I could maybe help you.”

She smiled but it wasn’t pretty.

“And what would you want for that, David?” she said.

“Got any ideas?”

And for a moment she did sound a little like the tramp Ruth said she was.

“No.Nothing,” I said.But she’d got me.I was blushing.

“Really?”

“Honest.Really.Nothing.I mean, I don’t know where you could go but at least you could get away.”

She nodded and looked at Susan.And then her tone of voice was totally different, very matter-of-fact, incredibly reasonable and very adult again.

“7 could,” she said.

“But she can’t.”

And suddenly Susan was crying again.She stood looking at Meg for a moment and then hobbled over and kissed her on the lips and on the cheek and then on the lips again.

“We’ll do something

she said.

“Meg?We’ll do something.All right?”

“Okay,” said Meg.

“All right.”

She looked at me.

They hugged and when they were finished Susan came over to me standing by the door and took my hand.

And together we locked her in again.

then , as if to negate my offer of help, I stayed away.

I B Under the circumstances it was the best I could do.

B Images haunted me.

Meg laughing on the Ferris wheel, lying on the Rock by the brook. Working in the garden in her shorts and halter with a big straw hat over her head. Running bases, fast, over at the playground. But most of all Meg naked in the heat of her own exertions, vulnerable and open to me.

On the other side I saw Willie's and Donny's tackle dummy.

I saw a mouth crushed into an air mattress for being unable to swallow a piece of toast.

The images were contradictory. They confused me.

So trying to decide what to do, if anything, and with the excuse of a rainy, ugly week to live through, I stayed away.

I saw Donny twice that week. The others I didn't see at all.

The first time I saw him I was emptying the garbage and he ran out into the gray afternoon drizzle with a sweatshirt pulled over his head.

"Guess what," he said.

"No water tonight."

It had been raining for three days.

"Huh?"

"Meg, dummy. Ruth's not letting her have any water tonight. Not until tomorrow morning."

“How come?”

He smiled.

“Long story,” he said.

“Tell you about it later.”

Then he ran back into the house.

The second time was a couple of days later. The weather had cleared and I was climbing onto my four-speed on the way to the store for my mother. Donny came riding up the driveway behind me on his old beat-up Schwinn.

“Where you going?”

“Over to the store. My mom needs milk and shit.

You?” “a ”r “Up to Eddie’s. There’s a game on up at the water tower later. Braves versus Bucks. Want us to wait for you?”

“Nah.” It was Little League and didn’t interest me.

Donny shook his head.

“I gotta get outta here,” he said.

“This stuff is driving me crazy. You know what they got me doin’ now?”

“What.”

“Throwin’ her shit pan out in back of the yard! You believe that?”

“I don’t get it. Why?”

“She’s not allowed upstairs at all anymore. No toilet privileges, nothin’. So the stupid little fuck tries to hold it.

But even she’s got to piss and shit sometime and now I got the goddamn detail! You believe it? What the hell’s the matter with Woofer?” “He shrugged.

“But Mom says it’s got to be one of us older guys.”

“Why?”

“How the hell do I know?”

He pushed off.

“Hey, you sure you don’t want us to wait up for you?”

“Nah. Not today.”

“Okay. See ya then. Stop over, huh?”

“Okay, I will.”

I didn’t, though. Not then.

It seemed so foreign to me. I couldn’t even imagine her going to the bathroom, much less using a pan that somebody would have to dump in back of the yard. What if I went over there and they hadn’t cleaned up yet that day? What if I had to smell her piss and shit down there? The whole thing disgusted me. She disgusted me. That wasn’t Meg. That was somebody else.

It became yet another strange new image to trouble me. And the problem was there was nobody to talk to, nobody to sort things out with.

If you talked to the kids on the block it was clear that everybody had some notion of what was happening over there—some vague and others pretty specific. But nobody had any opinions about it. It was as though what was happening were a storm or a sunset, some force of nature, something that just happened sometimes. And there was no point discussing summer showers.

I knew enough to be aware that, if you were a boy, you were expected to bring some matters to your father.

So I took a shot at that.

Now that I was older I was supposed to put in some time at the Eagle’s Nest now and then, helping to stock and clean up and whatnot, and I was working on the

grill in the kitchen with a whetstone and some soda water, pushing the grease into the side troughs with the whetstone as the grill slowly cooled and the soda water loosened the grease—drudge work of the kind I’d seen Meg do a thousand times—when finally I just started talking.

My father was making shrimp salad, crumbling bits of bread in to make it stretch further. I’ll There was a liquor delivery coming in and through the windowed partition between bar and kitchen we could see Hodie, my dad’s day-shift bartender, ticking off the cartons on an order sheet and arguing with the delivery man over a couple cases of vodka. It was the house brand and evidently the guy had shorted him. Hodie was mad. Hodie was a rail- j thin Georgia cracker with a temper volatile enough to have kept him in the brig throughout half the war. The delivery man was sweating, a My father watched, amused. Except to Hodie, two cases was no big deal. Just so long as my father wasn’t paying for something he wasn’t getting. But maybe it was Hodie’s anger that got me started. j] “Dad,” I said.

“Did you ever see a guy hit a girl?”

My father shrugged, sa “Sure,” he said.

“I guess so. Kids. Drunks. I’ve seen a few. Why?”

“You figure it’s ever... okay... to do that?”

“Okay? You mean justified?”

“Yeah.”

He laughed.

“That’s a tough one,” he said.

“A woman can really tick you off sometimes. I’d say in general, no.

I

mean, you got to have better ways to deal with a woman than that. You have to respect the fact that the woman's the weaker of the species. It's like being a bully, you know."

He wiped his hands on his apron. Then he smiled.

"Only thing is," he said, "I've got to say I've seen 'em deserve it now and then. You work in a bar, you see that kind of thing. A woman gets too much to drink, gets abusive, loud, maybe even takes a poke at the guy she's with. Now what's he supposed to do? Just sit there? So he whacks her one. Now, you've got to break up that kind of thing straightaway.

"See, it's like the exception that proves the rule. You should never hit a woman, never—and God forbid I ever catch you doing it. Because if I do you've had it. But sometimes there's nothing else you can do. You get pushed that far. You see? It works both ways."

I was sweating. It was as much the conversation as the work but with the work there I had an excuse.

My father had begun on the tuna salad. There was crumbled bread in that too, and pickle relish. In the next room Hodie had run the guy back to his truck to search for the missing vodka.

I tried to make sense of what he was saying: it was never okay but then sometimes it was.

You get pushed that far.

That got stuck in my mind. Had Meg pushed Ruth too hard at some point? Done something I hadn't seen?

Was this a never or a sometimes situation?

"Why d'you ask?" said my father.

"I don't know," I said.

“Some of us were talking.”

He nodded.

“Well, best bet’s to keep your hands to yourself. Men or women. That’s how you stay out of trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

I poured some more soda water on the grill and watched it sizzle, “s ”People say Eddie’s dad beats up on Mrs. Crocker, though. On Denise and Eddie too.”

My father frowned.

“Yes. I know.”

“You mean it’s true.”

“I didn’t say it was true.”

“But it is, right?”

He sighed.

“Listen,” he said.

“I don’t know why you’re all of a sudden so interested. But you’re old enough to know, to understand I guess... it’s like I said before.

Sometimes you get pushed, a man feels pushed, and he does... what he knows he shouldn’t ought to do.”

And he was right. I was old enough to understand.

And I heard a subtext there. Distinct as the echoes of Hodie yelling at the delivery man outside.

At some point and for some reason, my father had hit my mother.

And then I even half remembered it. Waking up out of I a deep sleep. The crash of furniture. Yelling. And a slap.

A long time ago.

I felt a sudden shock of anger toward him. I looked at his bulk and thought about my mother. And then slowly the coldness set in, the sense of isolation and of safety. And it occurred to me that my mother was the one to talk to about all this. She'd know how it felt, what it meant.

But I couldn't then. Not even if she'd been there right that minute. I didn't try.

I watched my father finish the salads and wipe his hands again on the white cotton apron we used to joke about getting condemned by the Board of Health and then start slicing salami on the electric meat slicer he'd just bought and was so proud of and I pushed the grease into the trough until the grill was shiny clean.

And nothing whatever was solved.

And soon I went back again.

what brought me back was that single unstoppable image of Meg's body. It sparked a thousand fantasies, day and night. Some of them tender, some violent—some ridiculous.

I'd be lying in bed at night with the transistor radio hidden under the pillow playing Danny and the Juniors' "At the Hop," and I'd close my eyes and there would be Meg jitter bugging with some unseen partner, the only girl at Teen's Canteen dancing in a pair of white bobby sox rolled down at the top and nothing else. Comfortable with her nudity as though she'd just bought the emperor's new clothes.

Or we'd be playing Monopoly sitting across from one another and I'd hit Boardwalk or Marvin Gardens and she'd stand up and sigh and step out of her thin white cotton panties.

But more often the song on the radio would be something like "Twilight Time" by the Platters and Meg would be naked in my arms in the deep blue Technicolor starlight and we'd kiss.

Or the game would be The Game—and there was nothing funny about it at all. I felt nervous and jumpy.

I felt like I had to go over. Just as I was afraid of what
I'd find when I did.

Ik

Even my mother noticed it. I'd catch her watching me lips pursed, wondering, as I leapt up from the dinner table spilling the water glass or lurched into the kitchen for a Coke.

Perhaps that was one reason I never spoke to her. Or maybe it was just that she was my mother, and a woman.

But I did go over.

And when I did, things had changed again.

I let myself in and the first thing I heard was Ruth coughing, then talking in a low voice, and I realized it had to be Meg she was speaking to. She had that tone she would never have used to any of the rest of us, like she was a teacher talking to a little girl, instructing. I went downstairs.

They'd rigged up the work light, strung the cable from the outlet over the washer to a hook in one of Willie Sr.'s crossbeams. The caged bulb dangled, brightly glaring.

Ruth was sitting in a folding chair, part of the old card-table set they kept down there, sitting with her back to me, smoking. Cigarette butts littered the floor like she'd been there a while.

The boys were nowhere around.

Meg was standing in front of her in a frilly yellow dress, not the sort of dress you'd picture her wearing at all, and I guessed it was Ruth's, and old, and could see it was none too clean. It had short puffy sleeves and a full pleated skirt, so that her arms and legs were bare.

Ruth was wearing a blue-green version of something similar, but plainer, less flounce and frills.

Above the cigarette smoke I could smell camphor.

Mothballs.

Ruth kept talking.

You might have thought they were sisters at first, roughly the same weight though Ruth was taller and skinnier, both of them with hair that was slightly oily now and both of them wearing these old smelly dresses like they were trying things on for a party.

Except that Ruth just sat there smoking.

While Meg was up against one of Willie's four-by-four support posts, arms tied tightly around it behind her back, feet tied too.

She had the gag on but no blindfold.

"When I was a girl like you," Ruth was saying, "I did, I searched for God. I went to every church in town. Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist. You name it. I even went to the novenas over at Saint Matties, sat up in the balcony where the organ was.

"That was before I knew, see, what women were. And you know who taught me? My mom did."

"Course, she didn't know she was teaching me, not the way I'm teaching you. It was more what I saw."

"Now I want you to know and understand that they gave me everything, my parents did—everything a girl could wish for, that's what I had. Except for college of course, but girls didn't go in for college much in those days anyhow. But my daddy, rest his soul, he worked hard for a living and my momma and me, we had it all. Not like Willie did me."

She lit a new Tareyton from the butt of the old one and tossed the butt to the floor. And I guessed she hadn't noticed me behind her or else she didn't care because even though Meg was looking right at me with a strange sort of expression on her face, and even though I'd made the usual noise coming down the rickety old stairs, she didn't turn or stop talking not even to light the cigarette. She talked right through the smoke. "But my daddy drank like Willie," she said, "and I'd hear him. Him coming in nights and straight for the bed and mount my mother like a mare. I'd hear 'em huffin' and puffin' up in there, my mother no-no-no-ing and the occasional odd slap now and then and

that was just like Willie too.

Because we women repeat the same mistakes as our mothers made giving in all the time to a man. I had that weakness too and that's how come I got all these boys he left me with to starve with. Can't work the way I did, back there during the war. The men get all the jobs now. And I've got kids to raise.

"Oh, Willie sends the checks but it's not enough. You know that. You see that. Your checks don't do much good either.

"Can you see what I'm saying to you? You got the Curse. And I don't mean your period. You got it worse even than I ever did. I can smell it on you, Meggy! You'll be doing just what my mother and I did with some asshole of an Irishman beatin' up on you and fuckin' you and making you like it, makin' you love it, and then wham, he's up and gone.

"That fucking. That's the thing. That warm wet pussy of yours. That's the Curse, you know? Curse of Eve. That's the weakness. That's where they got us. j|| "I tell you. A woman's nothing but a slut and an animal. You got to see that, you got to remember. Just used and screwed and punished. Nothing but a stupid loser slut with a hole in her and that's all she'll ever be. a 'i "Only thing I can do for you is what I'm doing. I can sort of try to burn it outta you."

She lit a match.

"See?"

She tossed it at Meg's yellow dress. It died reaching her and fell smoking to the floor. She lit another.

"See?"

She leaned in farther this time and tossed it and when the match hit the dress it was still burning. It lodged between the pleats. Meg squirmed against the four-by-four and shook it off.

"Strong young healthy girl like you—you think you smell so fresh and good. But to me you smell like burning.

Like hot cunt. You got the Curse and the weakness. You've got it, Meggy."

There was a small black spot on her dress where the match had been. Meg was looking at me, making sounds behind the gag.

Ruth dropped her cigarette and shifted her foot to grind it out.

She got off the chair, leaned down and struck another match. The room seemed suddenly thick with sulfur.

She held it to the hem of the dress.

“See?” she said.

“I’d think you’d be grateful.”

Meg squirmed, struggling hard against the ropes.

The hem charred brown and black but did not flare.

The match burned low. Ruth shook it out and dropped it.

Then she lit another.

She held it low to the hem, the same place she’d already burned. There was a feeling about her like some strange mad scientist performing an experiment in a movie.

The scorched dress smelted like ironing.

Meg struggled. Ruth just took her dress in hand and applied the match until it began to burn, then dropped it back against Meg’s leg.

I watched the thin line of flame start crawling.

Spreading.

It was like Woofer with his soldiers in the incinerator.

Only this was for real. Meg’s high muffled squealing made it real.

It was halfway up her thigh now.

I started to move, to bat the flames out with my hands.

Then Ruth reached over and doused her dress with the Coke she'd had sitting beside her on the floor.

She looked at me, laughing.

Meg slumped with relief.

I guess I looked pretty scared. Because Ruth kept laughing. And I realized that part of her must have been aware I was there behind her all along. But she didn't care.

My eavesdropping didn't matter. Nothing mattered but her concentration on the lesson she was giving Meg. It was there in her eyes, something I'd never seen before.

I've seen it since.

Too frequently.

In the eyes of my first wife, after her second nervous breakdown. In the eyes of some of her companions at the "rest home." One of whom, I'm told, murdered his wife and infant children with a pair of garden shears.

It's a cold, stark emptiness that has no laughter in it.

No compassion, and no mercy. It's feral. Like the eyes of a hunting animal.

Like the eyes of snakes.

That was Ruth.

"What do you think?" she said.

"Think she'll listen?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You want to play cards?"

“Cards?”

“Crazy Eights or something.”

“Sure.I guess.”Anything, I thought.Anything you want to do.

“Just till the boys come home,” she said.

We went upstairs and played and I don’t think we said ten words to each other the whole game.

I drank a lot of Cokes.She smoked a lot of cigarettes.

She won.

It turned out that Donny, Willie, and Woofer had been to a matinee of How To Make a Monster.That would have pissed me off ordinarily because just a few months ago we’d seen a double bill together of I Was a Teenage Werewolf and / Was a Teenage Frankenstein and this was a kind of sequel, with the same monsters, and they were supposed to wait for me or at least remind me.But they said it wasn’t as good as the first two anyway and I was still thinking about what I’d seen below, and as Ruth and I got to the last couple of hands the subject came round to Meg.

“She stinks,” said Woofer.

“She’s dirty.We ought to wash her.”

I hadn’t noticed any stink.

Just camphor, smoke and sulfur.

And Woofer was one to talk.

“Good idea,” said Donny.

“It’s been a while.I bet she’d like it.”

“Who cares what she likes?”said Willie.

Ruth just listened.

“We’d have to let her come upstairs,” said Donny.

“She could try to run away.”

“Come on. Where’s she gonna go?” said Woofer.

“Where’s she gonna run to? Anyway we could tie her.”

“I guess.”

“And we could get Susan.”

“I guess so.”

“Where is she?”

“Susan’s in her room,” said Ruth.

“I think she hides from me.”

“Nan,” said Donny.

“She reads all the time.”

“She hides. I think she hides.”

Ruth’s eyes still looked strange and glittery to me, and I guess to the others too. Because nobody contradicted her any further.

“How about it, Ma?” said Woofer.

“Can we?”

Our card game was over but Ruth still sat there shuffling the deck. Then she nodded.

“She could use it I suppose,” she said dully.

“We’ll have to strip her,” said Willie.

“I’ll do that,” Ruth said.

“You boys remember.”

“Yeah,” said Woofer.

“We remember.No touching.”

“That’s right.”

I looked at Willie and Donny.Willie was scowling.He had his hands in his pockets.He shuffled his feet, shoulders hunched.

What a retard, I thought.

But Donny looked thoughtful, like a full-grown man with a purpose and a job to do now and he was considering the best and most efficient way to go about it.

Woofer smiled brightly.

“Okay,” he said.

“Let’s get her!”

We trooped downstairs, Ruth trailing a ways behind.

Donny untied her, legs first and then the hands, gave her a moment to massage her wrists and then tied them back together again in front of her.He took off the gag and put it in his pocket.

Nobody mentioned the burns or Coke stains on her dress.Though they had to be the first thing you noticed.

She licked her lips.

“A drink?”she asked.

“In a minute,” said Donny.

“We’re going upstairs.”

“We are?”

“Yeah.”

She didn’t ask why.

Holding onto the rope, Donny led her upstairs, with Woofer ahead of him and Willie and I directly in back. Again Ruth lagged behind.

I was very aware of her back there. There was something wrong with her—that I was sure of. She seemed tired, distant, not wholly there. Her footsteps on the stairs seemed lighter than ours were, lighter than they should be, barely a whisper—though she moved slowly and with difficulty, like she’d gained twenty pounds. I didn’t know much about mental problems then but I knew what I was watching wasn’t entirely normal. She bothered me. “”-When we got upstairs Donny sat Meg down at the dining-room table and got her a glass of water from the kitchen sink.

It was the first I’d noticed the sink. It was piled high with dirty dishes, more than they could have used in just one day. More like two or three days’ worth was stuffed in there.

And seeing that made me notice other things, made me look around a bit.

I was not a kid who noticed dust. Who did? But I noticed how dusty and dirty the place was now, most visibly on the end tables in the living room behind me where you could see the streaks of hand prints across the surface. There were toast crumbs on the table in front of Meg. The ashtray beside her looked as if it hadn’t been cleaned in decades. I saw two wooden matches lying on the throw rug in the hall next to a piece of paper that looked like the crumpled-up top of a cigarette pack, casually discarded.

I had the strangest feeling. Of something winding down. Disintegrating slowly.

Meg finished her glass of water and asked for another.

Please, she said.

“Don’t worry,” said Willie.

“You’ll get water.” I Meg looked puzzled.

“We’re gonna wash you,” he said. “What?”

“The boys thought it would be nice if you had a shower,” said Ruth.

“You’d like that wouldn’t you.”

Meg hesitated. You could see why. That wasn’t exactly the way Willie had put it. Willie had said we’re gonna wash you. “Y-yes,” she said. “Very thoughtful of them too,” said Ruth.

“I’m glad you’re glad.”

It , was like she was talking to herself, almost mumbling.

Donny and I exchanged a look. I could see he was a little nervous about her.

“Think I’ll have a beer,” said Ruth.

She got up and went to the kitchen.

“Anybody join me?”

Nobody seemed to want any. That in itself was unusual. She peered into the refrigerator. She looked around.

Then she closed it again.

“None left,” she said, shuffling back to the dining room.

“Why didn’t somebody buy beer?”

“Mom,” said Donny.

“We can’t. We’re kids. They don’t let us buy beer.”

Ruth chuckled.

“Right,” she said.

Then she turned around again.

“I’ll have a scotch instead.”

She dug into the cabinet and came up with a bottle.

She walked back into the dining room, picked up Meg’s water glass and poured herself about two inches of the stuff.

“We gonna do this or not?” said Willie.

Ruth drank.

“Sure we are,” she said.

Meg looked from one of us to the other.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Do what? I thought I was... I thought you were letting me have a shower.”

“We are,” said Donny.

“We have to supervise, though,” said Ruth.

She took another drink and the liquor seemed to strike a sudden fire in back of her eyes.

“Make sure you get clean,” she said.

Meg understood her then.

“I don’t want it,” she said.

“Don’t matter what you want,” said Willie.

“What matters is what we want.”

“You stink,” said Woofer.

“You need a shower.”

“It’s decided already,” said Donny.

She looked at Ruth. Ruth hunched over her drink watching her like a tired old bird of prey.

“Why can’t you just... give me... a little privacy?”

Ruth laughed.

“I’d have thought you’d have about had it with privacy, down there all day.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean...”

“I know what you mean. And the answer is we can’t trust you. Can’t trust you one way, can’t trust you another.

You’ll go in there, throw a little water on yourself, and that’s clean.”

“No I wouldn’t. I swear I wouldn’t. I’d kill for a shower.”

Ruth shrugged.

“Well then. You got one. And you don’t have to kill for it, do you.”

“Please.”

Ruth waved her away.

“Get outta that dress now, before you get me mad.”

Meg looked at each of us one at a time and then I guess she figured that a supervised shower was better than no shower at all because she sighed.

“My hands,” she said.

“Right,” said Ruth.

“Unzip her, Donny. Then undo her hands. Then do ‘em up again.” a “Me?”

“Yeah.”

I was a little surprised too. I guess she’d decided to relax on the no touching rule.

Meg stood up and so did Donny. The dress unzipped to halfway down her back. He untied her. Then he went behind her again to slip the dress off her shoulders.

“Can I have a towel please, at least?”

Ruth smiled.

“You’re not wet yet,” she said. She nodded to Donny.

Meg closed her eyes and stood very still and rigid while Donny took the filly short sleeves and dragged them down over her arms and bared her breasts and then her hips and thighs, and then it lay at her feet. She stepped out of it. Her eyes were still shut tight. It was as though if she couldn’t see us then we couldn’t see her.

“Tie her again,” said Ruth.

I realized I was holding my breath.

Donny walked around in front of her. She put her hands together for him and Donny started to tie them.

“No,” said Ruth.

“Put them behind her this time.”

Meg’s eyes flashed open.

“Behind me! How am I going to wash if...?”

Ruth stood up.

“Goddammit! Don’t you sass me, girl!

If I say behind you then it’s behind you and if I say stuff ‘em up your ass then you’ll do that too! Don’t you sass me! You hear? Goddammit! Goddamn you!”

“I’ll wash you—that’s how! Now do as I say. Fast!”

And you could see that Meg was scared but she didn’t resist as Donny took her

arms behind her and tied them at the wrists. She'd closed her eyes again. Only this time there were little pools of wet around them.

"All right, head her in," said Ruth.

Donny marched her down the narrow hallway to the bathroom. We followed. The bathroom was small but all of us crowded inside. Woofer sat on the hamper. Willie leaned against the sink. I stood next to him.

In the hall opposite the bathroom there was a closet, and Ruth was rummaging around in there. She came out with a pair of yellow rubber gloves. She put them on. They went all the way up to her elbows.

She leaned over and turned on the tap in the bathtub.

The tap marked "H" for hot.

That tap only.

She let it run awhile.

She tested it with her hand, letting it run down over the rubber glove.

Her mouth was a grim straight line.

The water ran hard and steaming. Pounded against the drain. Then she threw the setting to "Shower" and closed the clear plastic curtain.

The steam billowed up.

Meg's eyes were still shut. Tears streaked down her face.,

"The steam threw a mist over all of us now.

Suddenly Meg felt it. And knew what it meant. i| An She opened her eyes and threw herself back, frightened, screaming, but Donny already had one arm and Ruth grabbed the other. She fought them, bucking and twisting, screaming no. And she was strong. She was still strong, "jaj; Ruth lost her grip.

"God damn you!" she bellowed.

“You want me to get your sister? You want me to get your precious Susan? You want her in here instead? Burning?”

Meg whirled on her. Suddenly furious. Wild. Insane.

“Yes!” she screamed.

“Yes! You bitch! Get Susan! Get her! I don’t give a damn anymore!”

Ruth looked at her, eyes narrowed. Then she looked at Willie. She shrugged.

“Get her,” she said mildly.

He didn’t have to.

I turned as he passed me and then saw him stop because Susan was there already, watching us, standing in the hall. And she was crying too.

Meg saw her too.

And she crumbled.

“Noooooooo,” she cried.

“Noooooooo. Pleease...”

And for a moment we stood silent in the warm heavy mist listening to the scalding stream and to her sobbing.

Knowing what would happen. Knowing how it would be.

Then Ruth threw the curtain aside.

“Get her in,” she said to Donny.

“And be careful of yourself.”

I watched them put her in and Ruth adjust the shower nozzle to send the scorching spray up slowly over her legs and thighs and belly and finally up over her breasts to shatter across her nipples while her arms strained desperately to break free behind her and everywhere the water hit went suddenly red, red, the

color of pain—and at last I couldn't stand the screaming.

But only once.

I didn't run again.

After that day I was like an addict, and my drug was knowing. Knowing what was possible. Knowing how far it could go. Where they'd dare to take it all.

It was always they. I stood outside, or felt I did. From both Meg and Susan on the one side and the Chandlers on the other. I'd participated in nothing directly. I'd watched. Never touched. And that was all. As long as I maintained that stance I could imagine I was, if not exactly blameless, not exactly culpable either.

It was like sitting in a movie. Sometimes it was a scary movie, sure—where you worried whether the hero and heroine were going to make it through all right. But just that.

Just a movie. You'd get up when it was over properly scared and excited and walk out of the dark and leave it all behind.

And then sometimes it was more like the kind of movies that came along later in the Sixties—foreign movies, mostly—where the dominant feeling you had was of inhabiting some fascinating, hypnotic density of obscure illusion, of layers and layers of meaning that in the end indicated a total absence of meaning, where actors with cardboard faces moved passively through surreal nightmare landscapes, empty of emotions, adrift.

Like me.

Of course we wrote and directed these mind-films of ours as well as watched them. So I suppose it was inevitable that we add to our cast of characters.

I suppose it was also inevitable that Eddie Crocker be our first audition.

It was a bright sunny morning toward the end of July, three weeks into Meg's captivity, when I first went over and found him there, a In the few days since the shower they'd let her keep her clothes on—there were blisters and they were allowing them to heal—and they were treating her pretty well all told, feeding her soup and sandwiches, giving her water when she wanted it. Ruth had even

put sheets over the air mattress and swept the cigarette butts off the floor. And it was tough to say whether Willie did more complaining about his latest toothache or about how boring things had gotten.

With Eddie, that changed.

She still had her clothes on when I got there—a pair of faded jeans and a blouse—but they had her bound and gagged again, lying on her stomach over the worktable, each arm tied to one of the legs of the table, feet tied together on the floor.

Eddie had one of his Keds off and was pounding her ass.

Then he'd quit for a while and Willie'd work on her back, legs, and rear with a leather belt. They hit her hard.

Eddie especially.

Woofer and Donny stood watching.

I watched too. But only briefly.

I didn't like him there.

Eddie was too much into it.

It was far too easy to picture him walking down the street that day grinning at us with the blacksnake between his teeth, flinging it over and over at us until the snake lay dead in the street.

This was the kid who would bite the head off a frog.

This was the kid who would just as soon hit you in the head with a rock or whack you in the balls with a stick as look at you.

Eddie was passionate.

It was hot that day and the sweat rolled off him, streamed out of his close-cut carrot-red hair and down across his forehead. As usual he had his shirt off so we could see his great physique and the smell of his sweat rolled off him too.

He smelled salty and sticky-sweet, like old bad meat.

I didn't stay.

I went upstairs.

Susan was putting together a jigsaw puzzle on a kitchen table. There was a half-empty glass of milk beside her.

The television, for once, was silent. You could hear the slaps and laughter from below.

I asked for Ruth.

Ruth, Susan said, was lying in the bedroom. One of her headaches. She'd been having them a lot lately.

So we sat there saying nothing. I got myself a Budweiser from the fridge. Susan was doing pretty well on the puzzle. She had more than half of it done. The picture was called "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri," by George Caleb Bingham and showed a grim gnarly old man in a funny pointed cap and a dreamy-faced teenager in a canoe paddling downstream at sunset, a black cat sitting tethered to the prow. She had the edges in and the cat and the canoe and most of the man and boy. There was only the sky and the river and some of the trees left now. I watched her fit a piece into the river. I sipped the beer.

"So how you doin'?" I asked.

She didn't look up.

"Fine," she said.

I heard laughter from the shelter.

She tried another piece. It didn't fit.

"That bother you?" I said. I meant the sounds.

"Yes," she said. But she didn't say it as though it did.

It was just a fact of life. | "A lot?" a "Uh-huh."

I nodded. There was nothing much to say then after that. I watched her and drank the beer. Pretty soon she had the boy completed and was working on the trees.

“I can’t make them stop, y’know?” I said.

“I know.”

“Eddie’s there. For one thing.”

“I know.”

I finished the beer.

“I would if I could,” I said. I wondered if it was true.

So did she.

“Yes?” she said.

And for the first time she looked up at me, eyes very mature and thoughtful. A lot like her sister’s.

“

“Course I would.”

She went back to the puzzle again, frowning.

“Maybe they’ll get tired,” I said, realizing as soon as I said it how lame that sounded. Susan didn’t answer.

But then a moment later the sounds did stop and I heard footsteps come up the stairs.

It was Eddie and Willie. Both of them flushed, shirts open. Willie’s middle a fat, dead-white ugly roll. They ignored us and went to the refrigerator. I watched them crack a Coke for Willie and a Bud for Eddie and then push things around looking for something to eat. I guess there wasn’t much because they closed it again.

“You gotta give it to her,” Eddie was saying.

“She don’t cry much. She ain’t chicken.”

If I had felt detached from all this, Eddie was in another realm entirely. Eddie’s voice was like ice. It was Willie who was fat and ugly but it was Eddie who disgusted me.

Willie laughed.

“That’s ‘cause she’s all cried out,” he said.

“You should’ve seen her after her scrubbin’ the other day.”

“Yeah. I guess. You think we should bring something down for Donny and Woofer?”

“They didn’t ask for nothin’. They want it, let ‘em get it.”

“I wish you had some food, man,” said Eddie.

And they started to walk back down. They continued to ignore us. That was fine with me. I watched them disappear down the stairwell. | “So what are you gonna do?” said Eddie. I felt his voice drift up at me like a wisp of toxic smoke.

“Kill her?”

I froze.

“Nah,” said Willie.

And then he said something else but the sound of their footsteps on the stairs drowned it out for us. I Kill her? I felt the words slide along my spine.

Somebody walking over my grave, my mother would say.

Leave it to Eddie, I thought. Leave it to him.

To state the obvious.

I’d wondered how far it could go, how it could end.

Wondered it obscurely, like a mathematical problem, j And here was the

unimaginable quietly imagined, two kids discussing it, a Coke and a beer in hand.

I thought of Ruth lying in the bedroom with her sick headache.

I thought of how they were down there all alone with her now—with Eddie with them.

It could happen. Yes it could.

It could happen fast. Almost by accident.

It didn't occur to me to wonder why I still equated Ruth with supervision. I just did.

She was still an adult, wasn't she?

Adults couldn't let that happen, could they? I looked at Susan. If she'd heard what Eddie'd said she gave no sign. She worked on the puzzle.

Hands trembling, afraid to listen and just as scared not to, I worked with her.

He was there every day after that for about a week.

On the second day his sister Denise came too. Together they force-fed her crackers, which she couldn't really eat because the gag had been on overnight again and they'd denied her water. Eddie got mad and smacked her across the mouth with an aluminum curtain rod, bending the rod and leaving a broad red welt across her cheek, cutting her lower lip.

The rest of the day they played tackle dummy again.

Ruth was hardly ever there. Her headaches came more and more frequently now. She complained about her skin itching, particularly her face and hands. It seemed to me she'd lost weight. A fever blister appeared on her lip and stayed for days. Even with the TV on you could always hear her coughing upstairs, deep down into her lungs.

With Ruth not around the prohibition against touching Meg disappeared.

I | Denise was the one who started it. Denise liked to pinch. She had strong fingers for a girl her age. She would take Meg's flesh and twist it, commanding her to cry. Most of the time Meg wouldn't cry. That made Denise try harder. Her favorite targets were Meg's breasts—you could tell because she saved them for last.

And then, usually, Meg would cry.

Willie liked to drape her over the table, pull down her pants and smack her bottom. | Woofer's thing was insects. He'd put a spider or a thousand-Iegger on her belly and watch her cringe.

It was Donny who surprised me. Whenever he thought that no one was looking he'd run his hands across her breasts or squeeze them slightly or feel her between her legs. I saw him plenty of times but I never let on. || He did it gently, like a lover. And once when the gag was off I even saw him kiss her. It was an awkward kiss but I sort of tender and strangely chaste when you consider that he had her there to do anything he wanted to her.

Then Eddie came in laughing one day with a dog turd in a plastic cup and they held her down over the table while Woofer pinched her nostrils until she had to open her mouth to breathe and Eddie slipped it in. And that was the last time anybody kissed her.

1 On Friday that week I had been working in the yard all afternoon until about four o'clock, and when I went over I could hear the radio blaring from the back-door landing, so I went down and saw that the group had expanded again.

Word had gotten around.

Not only were Eddie and Denise there but Harry Gray, Lou and Tony Morino, Glenn Knoll and even Kenny Robertson—a dozen people crowded into that tiny shelter counting Meg and me—and Ruth was standing in the doorway watching, smiling as they shouldered and elbowed her back and forth between them like a human pinball caught between a dozen human flippers.

Her hands were tied behind her.

There were beer cans and Cokes on the floor. Cigarette smoke hung over the room in thick gray drifting clouds. At some point the radio played an old Jerry Lee Lewis tune, "Breathless," and everybody laughed and started singing.

It ended with Meg on the floor, bruised and sobbing.

We trooped upstairs for refreshments.

My movie kept rolling.

Kids came and went after that all that following week.

Usually they did nothing but watch but I remember Glen Knoll and Harry Gray making her into what they called a “sandwich” one day—when Ruth wasn’t around—rubbing against her from front and back while she hung from the lines suspended from the nails in the beams across the ceiling. I remember Tony Morino bringing Woofer half a dozen garden slugs to put all over her body.

But unless it hurt, Meg was usually quiet now. After the dogshit incident it was hard to humiliate her. And not much could scare her. She seemed resigned. As though maybe all she had to do was wait and maybe we’d all get bored by this eventually and it would pass. She rarely rebelled. If she did we’d just call in Susan. But most of the time it didn’t come to that. She’d climb out of or into her clothes pretty much on command now. Out of only when we knew Ruth wasn’t going to be around or if Ruth herself suggested it, which wasn’t very often.

And much of the time we just sat there around the worktable, playing cards or Clue and drinking Cokes or looking through magazines, talking, and it was like Meg wasn’t even there at all except that we’d say something to mock or shame her now and then. Abuse that was casual and ordinary. Her presence compelled us in much the same passive way a trophy did—she was the centerpiece of our clubhouse. We spent most of our time there. It was the middle of summer but we were all getting pasty from sitting in the cellar. Meg just sat or stood there bound and silent, and mostly we asked nothing of her. Then maybe somebody would get an idea—a new way to use her—and try it out.

But basically it looked like maybe she was right.

Maybe we’d just get bored one day and stop coming. Ruth seemed preoccupied with herself and her various physical ailments—preoccupied, strange and distant. And without her to feed the flames our attentions toward Meg got more and more sporadic, less intense.

It occurred to me too that we were well into August now. In September we all

started school again. Willie, Donny, and I were leaving for our first term at a brand-new junior high, Mount Holly, completed just this summer, and Meg would be starting at the high school. It would have to end by then. It only stood to reason. You could keep a person chained out of sight through summer vacation and no one would notice necessarily. But keeping a kid out of school was something else.

So by September it would be over, one way or another.

So maybe she was right, I thought. Maybe all she needed to do was wait.

Then I'd think about what Eddie'd said. And worry that she was real wrong indeed.

It was Eddie who finished the clubhouse.

He did it by upping the ante again.

There were two incidents. The first one happened on a rainy, ugly day, the kind of day that starts out gray and never gets beyond the color of cream of mushroom soup before fading to black again.

Eddie had stolen two six-packs from his father and brought them along and he and Denise and Tony Morino chugged a few while Willie, Woofer, Donny and I went at ours more slowly. Soon the three of them were drunk and the six-packs gone and Willie went upstairs for more. Which was when Eddie decided he had to piss. Which gave him an idea.

He whispered it around.

When Willie came back he and Tony Morino took Meg down onto the floor and laid her on her back and tied her arms tightly to the legs of the table. Denise grabbed hold of her feet. They spread some newspapers under her head.

Then Eddie pissed in her face.

If Meg had not been tied to the table I think she'd have tried to kill him.

But instead people were laughing while she struggled and finally she slumped back down and lay there.

Then Donny got to thinking that Ruth wasn't going to like it much. They'd better clean things up. So they got Meg to her feet and tied her arms behind her back and held her, and Woofer picked up the papers and brought them outside to the incinerator while Donny ran some water in the big cement sink they had in the cellar for draining out the water from the washer. He dumped in a lot of Tide. Then he came back and he and Tony and Willie marched her out of the shelter into the basement proper over to the sink. They pushed her head down into the soapy water and held her under, laughing, while Willie scrubbed her hair. In a moment or two she was struggling. When they let her up she had to gasp for air.

But she was clean.

Then Eddie got another idea.

We had to rinse her, he said.

He let out the water, drained it, and ran the rinse water straight-out hot, just as Ruth had done in the shower.

Then, alone, he dunked her under.

When he let her up to the surface again her face was lobster red and she was shrieking, and Eddie's hand was so red you had to wonder how he'd held it there.

But now she was rinsed.

Cleaned and rinsed. And wouldn't Ruth be pleased about that?

Ruth was furious.

All the next day she kept cold compresses over Meg's eyes. There was serious fear for her sight. Her eyes were so puffy she could hardly open them, and they kept oozing liquid a whole lot thicker than anybody's tears ought to be. Her face looked splotched and horrible, like she'd contracted a mammoth case of poison ivy. But it was the eyes that worried everybody.

We kept her on the air mattress. We fed her.

Wisely, Eddie stayed away.

And the next day she was better. And the next day better still.

And the third day Eddie came back again.

I wasn't there that day—my father had me over at the Eagle's Nest—but I heard about it fast enough.

It seemed that Ruth was upstairs lying down and they figured she was asleep, napping through another headache.

Woofers, Donny and Willie were playing Crazy Eights when Eddie and Denise walked in.

Eddie wanted to take off her clothes again, just to look he said, and everybody agreed. He was quiet, calm. Drinking a Coke.

They stripped her and gagged her and tied her face up across the worktable, only this time they tied each of her feet to one of the table legs as well. Eddie's idea. He wanted to spread her. They left her awhile while the game of cards went on and Eddie finished his Coke.

Then Eddie tried to put the Coke bottle up inside her.

I guess they were all so amazed and involved with what he was doing that they didn't hear Ruth come down behind them because when she walked through the door there was Eddie with the lip of the green Coke bottle already inside her and everybody crowded around.

Ruth took one look and started screaming how nobody was supposed to touch her, nobody, she was dirty, she had diseases, and Eddie and Denise got the hell out of there, fast, leaving her to rail at Woofers and Willie and Donny.

And the rest of this I got from Donny.

And Donny said he was scared.

Because Ruth went really bonkers.

She raged around the room tearing at things and jabbering crazy stuff about how she never got out anymore, not to a movie or dinner or dancing or parties, all she ever did was sit here minding these goddamn fucking kids, cleaning, ironing, making lunch and breakfast, how she was getting old in there, old, her good years gone, her body gone all to hell on her—all the time slamming at the walls and the wire-mesh screen over the window and the worktable, kicking Eddie's Coke bottle until it smashed against the wall.

And then she said something like and you!you!to Meg and stared at her furious like it was her fault that Ruth's body was going and she couldn't go out anymore and called her a whore and a slut and no-good fucking trash—and then hauled off and kicked her, twice, between her legs.

And now she had bruises there.Terrible bruises.

Luckily, said Donny, Ruth had been wearing slippers.

I could picture it.

I had a dream that night, the night he told me.

I was home watching television and the fights were on, Sugar Ray Robinson against some big ungainly nameless faceless white guy, and my father was asleep next to me snoring in the overstuffed chair while I sat watching from the couch, and aside from the light from the TV set it was dark in the house and I was tired, very tired—and then things switched and I was suddenly actually at the fights, I was ringside, with people cheering around me, and Sugar Ray was wading in at the guy in that way he had, moving like a tank, flat-footed, swinging.It was exciting.

So I was cheering for Sugar Ray and I looked around for my father to see if he was cheering too but he was dead asleep in the seat beside me just as he'd been on the couch, sinking slowly to the floor.

"Wake up," my mother said, nudging him.I guess she'd been there all along but I hadn't seen her there.

"Wake up," she said.

But he didn't.And I looked back to the ring and instead of Sugar Ray it was Meg

inside the ring, Meg as I'd first seen her standing by the brook that day in shorts and a pale sleeveless blouse, her pony-tail red as flame swinging back and forth behind her as she pounded at the guy, pounded him. And I stood up, cheering, screaming.

"Meg!Meg!Meg!"

I woke up crying. My pillow soaked with tears.

I felt confused. Why should I be crying? I wasn't feeling anything.

I went to my parents' room.

They had separate beds now. They'd had them for years. As in the dream, my father was snoring. My mother slept silently beside him.

I walked to my mother's bed and stood there watching her, a dainty little dark-haired woman who looked younger at that moment, sleeping, than I think I'd ever seen her.

The room smelled thick with their sleep, the musty odor of breathing.

I wanted to wake her. I wanted to tell her. Everything.

She was the only one I could tell.

"Mom?" I said. Yet I said it very quietly, part of me still too scared or too unwilling to risk disturbing her. Tears were rolling down my cheeks. My nose was running. I sniffled. The sniffing sounded louder to me than my voice did calling her.

"Mom?"

She shifted, moaning slightly. ;H I had only to try one more time, I thought, in order to wake her.

And then I thought of Meg, alone in the long dark night of the shelter, lying there. Hurting.

Then I saw the dream.

I felt something clutch at me.

I couldn't breathe. I felt a sudden dizzying, rising horror.

The room went black. I felt myself exploding.

„ i And I knew my part in this.

My dull, careless betrayal.

My evil.

I felt the sob come at me huge and involuntary as a i scream. It felt like a scream. I covered my mouth and ran stumbling from the room, fell huddled to my knees in the hall outside their door. I sat there shaking, crying. I couldn't stop crying.

I sat there a very long time.

They didn't waken.

When I got to my feet it was nearly morning.

I went to my room. Through the window from my bed I watched the night turn deepest black and then a rich dark blue.

My thoughts spun round and round, diving through me like the morning sparrows flying off the eaves.

I sat and knew myself entirely and calmly watched the sunrise.

It helped that for now at least the others were excluded. I needed to talk to her.

I had to convince her I'd finally help.

I'd get her to run away with or without Susan. I couldn't see that Susan was in so much danger anyhow.

Nothing had happened to her so far except some spankings, at least nothing I'd seen. It was Meg who was in trouble. By now, I thought, she's got to have realized that.

It was both easier and harder than I expected.

Harder because I found out I was excluded too.

“My mom doesn’t want anybody around,” said Donny.

We were hiking over to the Community Pool, our first day there in weeks. It was hot with no breeze and three blocks from our street we were sweating.

“How come? I didn’t do anything. Why me?”

We rode along a downslope. We coasted awhile.

“It’s not that. You hear what Tony Morino did?”

“What.”

“He told his mother.”

“What?”

“Yeah. The little shit. His brother, Louie, let us onto it. I mean, not everything. I guess he couldn’t tell her everything. But enough. Told her we had Meg in the cellar.

Told her Ruth called her a whore and a slut and beat up on her.”

“Jesus. What’d she say?”

Donny laughed.

“Lucky for us the Morino’s are real strict Catholics. His mom said she probably deserved it, she’s probably loose or something. She said parents have a right and Ruth’s her mother now. So you know what we did?”

“What?”

“Me and Willie pretended we didn’t know. We got Tony to come along with us out to Bleeker’s Farm, the woods back there. He doesn’t know the place at all. We got him lost and then we ditched him back in the swamps. Took him two and a half hours to find his way out and get home and by then it was dark. But you

know the best part about it?His mom beat the crap out of him for missing dinner and coming home full of swamp muck and shit.His mom!”

We laughed.We pulled into the newly poured driveway by the Recreation building and parked our bikes at the bike stand and walked across the sticky, sweet-smelling tarmac to the pool.

We showed our plastic badges at the gate.The pool was crowded. Little kids kicking and splashing in the shallows like a school of piranha.The baby pool full of moms and dads guiding along their infants, pudgy fingers clutching duckiesand-dragons inner tubes.There were long impatient lines at the diving boards and refreshment stand. Yellowjackets in every trashcan swarming through ice-cream wrappers and soda.

The screaming and splashing and yelling while everybody ran around the fenced-in grass and concrete was deafening.The lifeguard’s whistle seemed to shriek about every thirty seconds.We threw off our towels and went over to the eight-foot section and sat with our legs dangling down in the chlorine-smelling water.

“So what’s that got to do with me?”I asked him.

He shrugged.

“I dunno,” he said.

“My mom’s all worried now.That somebody’s going to tell.”

“Me?Jeez, I won’t tell,” I said.Picturing myself in the dark, standing over my sleeping mother.

“You know I won’t tell.”

“I know.Ruth’s just weird these days.”

I couldn’t push it further.Donny wasn’t as stupid as his brother.He knew me.He’d know if I was pushing and wonder.

So I waited.We splashed with our feet.

“Look,” he said, “I’ll talk to her, all right?It’s bullshit.You been comin’ over our house for how many years now?”

“A lot.”

“So screw it.I’ll talk to her.Let’s get wet.”

We slipped into the pool.

The part that was easy was convincing Meg to go.

There was a reason for that.

For one last time, I told myself, I was going to have to stand and watch, waiting for the moment I could speak.And then I’d convince her.I even had a plan in mind.

And then it would be over.

I’d have to pretend I was with them no matter what—that it didn’t matter.One last time.

Yet it almost didn’t happen.

Because that one last time was nearly enough to push J us both over the edge.That last time was horrible.

It’s okay,“ Donny told me the following day.

“My mom says it’s okay to come.”

“Come where?”said my mother.

She was standing behind me at the kitchen counter, chopping onions. Donny stood on the porch behind the screen.With me in the way he hadn’t noticed her.

The kitchen reeked of onions.

“Where are you going?”she said.

I looked at him.He thought fast.

“We’re gonna try to get up to Sparta next Saturday, Mrs.Moran.Sort of a family picnic.We thought maybe David could come too.Would that be all right?”

“I don’t see why not,” said my mother, smiling.Donny was unfailingly polite to her without being obnoxious about it and she liked him for that though she had no use at all, really, for the rest of the family.

“Great!Thanks, Mrs.Moran.See you later, David,” he said.

So in a little while I went over.

Ruth was back into The Game.

She looked terrible.There were sores on her face and you knew she’d been scratching them because two were already scabbed over.Her hair was oily, limp, flecked with dandruff. The thin cotton shift looked as though she’d been sleeping in it for days.And now I was sure she’d lost weight.

You could see it in her face—the hollows under the eyes, the skin pulled tight across the cheekbones.

She was smoking as usual, sitting in a folding chair facing Meg.There was a half-eaten tuna sandwich on a paper plate beside her and she was using it as an ashtray.Two I.

Tareyton butts poked up out of the sagging wet white bread.

She was watching attentively, leaning forward in the chair, eyes narrowed.And I thought of the way she looked when she was watching her game shows on TV, shows like Twenty-One.Charles Van Doren, the English teacher from Columbia, had just been called a cheat for winning \$129,000 on the show the week before.Ruth had been inconsolable.As though she was cheated too.

But she watched Meg now with the same thoughtful intensity as when Van Doren was in his soundproof booth.

Playing along.

While Woofer poked Meg with his pocketknife.

They had hung her from the ceiling again, and she was up on her toes, straining, volumes of the World Book scattered at her feet. She was naked. She was dirty, she was bruised. Her skin had a pallor now beneath the sheen of sweat. But none of that mattered. It should have, but it didn't. The magic—the small cruel magic of seeing her that way—hovering over me for a moment like a spell.

She was all I knew of sex. And all I knew of cruelty. ~ For a moment I felt it flood me like a heady wine. I was with them again.

And then I looked at Woofer.

A pint-sized version of me, or what I could be, with a knife in his hand.

No wonder Ruth was concentrating.

They all were, Willie and Donny too, nobody saying a word, because a knife wasn't a strap or a belt or a stream of hot water, knives could hurt you seriously, permanently, and Woofer was small enough to only just barely understand that, to know that death and injury could happen but not to sense the consequences. They were skating thin ice and they knew it. Yet they let it go. They wanted it to happen. They were educating.

I didn't need the lessons.

So far there wasn't any blood but I knew there was every chance that there would be, it was just a matter of time.

Even behind the gag and blindfold you could see that Meg was terrified. Her chest and stomach heaved with fitful breathing. The scar on her arm stood out like jagged lightning.

He poked her in the belly. On her toes the way she was, there was no way she could back away from him. She just jerked against the ropes convulsively. Woofer giggled and poked her below the navel.

Ruth looked at me and nodded a greeting and lit another Tareyton. I recognized Meg's mother's wedding band fitting loose on her ring finger.

Woofer slid the blade over Meg's ribcage and poked her armpit. He did it so fast and so recklessly I kept looking for a line of blood along her ribs. But that time

she was lucky.

I saw something else though.

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?” said Ruth distractedly.

“On her leg there.”

“There was a red two-inch wedge-shaped mark on her thigh, just above the knee.

She puffed the Tareyton. She didn’t answer.

Willie did.

“Mom was ironing,” he said.

“She gave us some shit so Mom heaved the iron at her. Skinned her. No big deal, except now the iron’s busted.”

“No big deal my ass,” said Ruth.

She meant the iron.

Meanwhile Woofer slid the knife back down to Meg’s_ belly. This time he nicked her just at the bottom of the ribcage. “Whoops,” he said.

He turned to look at Ruth. Ruth stood up.

She took a drag on the cigarette and flicked off the ash.

Then she walked over.

Woofer backed away.

“Dammit, Ralphie,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He let go of the knife. It clattered to the floor.

You could see he was scared. But her tone was as blank as her face.

“Shit,” she said.

“Now we got to cauterize.” She lifted the cigarette.

I looked away.

I heard Meg scream behind the gag, a shrill thin muffled shriek that turned abruptly into a wail.

“Shut up,” said Ruth.

“Shut up or I’ll do it again.”

Meg couldn’t stop.

I felt myself trembling. I stared at the bare concrete wall.

Hold on, I thought, I heard the hiss. I heard her scream.

I could smell the burning.

I looked and saw Ruth with the cigarette in one hand while the other cupped her breast through the gray cotton dress. The hand was kneading. I saw the burn marks close together under Meg’s ribs, her body bathed in sudden sweat.

I saw Ruth’s hand move roughly over her wrinkled dress to press between her legs as she grunted and swayed and the cigarette drifted forward once again.

I was going to blow it. I knew it. I could feel it building. I was going to have to do something, say something.

Anything to stop the burning. I closed my eyes and still I saw Ruth’s hand clutch at the place between her legs. The scent of burning flesh was all around me. My stomach lurched. I turned and heard Meg scream and scream again and then suddenly Donny was saying Mom! Mom! Mom! in a voice that was hushed and suddenly filled with fear.

I couldn’t understand.

And then I heard it. The knocking.

There was someone at the door.

The front door.

I looked at Ruth.

She was staring at Meg and her face was peaceful and relaxed, unconcerned and distant. Slowly she raised the cigarette to her lips and took a long deep drag. Tasting her.

I felt my stomach lurch again.

I heard the knocking.

“Get it,” she said.

“Go slow. Go easy.”

She stood quietly while Willie and Donny glanced at one another and then went upstairs.

Woofers looked at Ruth and then at Meg. He seemed confused, suddenly just a little boy again who wanted to be told what to do. Should I go or should I stay? But there wasn't any help for him, not with Ruth that way. So finally he made up his own mind. He followed his brothers.

I waited until he was gone.

"Ruth?" I said.

She didn't seem to hear me.

Ruth?"

She just kept staring.

"Don't you think... ? I mean, if it's somebody..

Should you be leaving it to them? To Willie and Donny?"

"Hmmm?"

She looked at me but I'm not sure she saw me. I've never seen anyone feel so empty.

But this was my chance. Maybe my only chance. I knew I had to push her.

"Don't you think you ought to handle it, Ruth?

Suppose it's Mr. Jennings again?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Jennings. Officer Jennings. The cops, Ruth."

"Oh."

“I can... watch her for you.”

“Watch her?” All “To make sure she doesn’t...”

“Yes.Good.Watch her.Good idea.Thank you, Davy.”She started toward the doorway, her movements slow and dreamlike.Then she turned. And now her voice was tight sharp, her back straight.Her eyes seemed shattered with reflected light.

“You’d better not fuck up,” she said.

“What?”

She pressed her finger to her lips and smiled.

“One sound down here and I promise I’ll kill the both of you.Not punish you.Kill you.Dead.You got that, Davy?

Are we straight about that?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good.Very good.”

She turned and then I heard her slippers shuffling up the stairs.I heard voices from above but couldn’t make them out.

I turned to Meg.

I saw where she’d burned her the third time.Her right breast.

“Oh Jesus, Meg,” I said.I went to her.

“It’s David.I slipped off the blindfold so she could see me.Her eyes were wild.

“Meg,” I said.

“Meg, listen.Listen please.Please don’t make any noise.You heard what she said? She’ll do it, Meg.Please don’t scream or anything, okay?I want to help you.There’s not much time.Listen to me.I’ll take off the gag, all right?You won’t scream?It won’t help.It could be anybody up there.The Avon lady.Ruth can talk her way out of it.She can talk her way out of anything.But I’m going to get you out of here, you understand me?I’m going to get you out!”

I was talking a mile a minute but I couldn’t stop.I slipped off the gag so she could answer.

She licked her lips.

“How?”she said.Her voice a tiny painful rasp of sound.

“Tonight.Late.When they’re asleep.It’s got to look like you did it on your own.By yourself.Okay?”

She nodded.

“I’ve got some money,” I said.

“You’ll be okay.And I can hang around here and make sure nothing happens to Susan.Then maybe we can figure out some way to get her away too.Go back to the cops, maybe.Show them... this.

“All right?”

“All right.”

“All right.Tonight.I promise.”

I heard the screened front door slam shut and footsteps cross the living room, heard them coming down the stairs.I gagged her again.I slipped on the blindfold.

It was Donny and Willie.

They glared at me.

“How’d you know?”asked Donny.

“Know what?”

“Did you tell him?”

“Tell who? Tell him what? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t hack around with me, David. Ruth said you told her it might be Jennings at the door.”

“So who the hell do you think it was, ass face

Oh Jesus, I thought. Oh shit. And I’d begged her not to scream.

We could have stopped it then and there.

I had to play it through for them though.

“You’re kidding,” I said.

“I’m not kidding.”

“Mr. Jennings? My God, it was just a guess.”

“Pretty good guess,” said Willie.

“It was just a thing to say to get her...”

“Get her what?”

Up there I thought.

“To get her moving again. Christ, you saw her. She was like a fucking zombie down here!”

They looked at each other.

“She did get pretty weird,” said Donny.

Willie shrugged.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

I wanted to keep them going. So they wouldn’t think about my being here alone

with her.

“What’d you say?” I asked.

“Was he after Meg?”

“Sort of,” said Donny.

“Said he just dropped by to see how the nice young girls were doing. So we showed him Susan in her room. Said Meg was out shopping. Susan didn’t say a word of course—didn’t dare to. So I guess he bought it.

Seemed kinda uncomfortable. Kinda shy for a cop.”

“Where’s your mom?”

“She said she wanted to lie down awhile.”

“What’ll you do for dinner?”

It was an inane thing to say but the first thing I thought of.

I had a penlight flashlight, a pocketknife and thirty seven dollars in snow-shoveling money in my pocket. I wore sneakers and jeans and the T-shirt my mother’d dyed black for me after Elvis wore one in Loving You. By the time I crossed the driveway to their yard the T-shirt was plastered to my back like a second skin.

The house was dark.

I stepped up onto the porch and waited, listening. The night was still and clear beneath a three-quarter moon.

The Chandler house seemed to breathe at me, creaking like the bones of a sleeping old woman.

It was scary.

For a moment I wanted to forget about this, go home and get into bed and pull up the covers. I wanted to be in another town entirely. All that evening I’d fantasized my mother or my father saying, well David, I don’t know how to

break this to you but we're moving.

No such luck.

I kept seeing myself getting caught on the stairs.

Suddenly the light would go on and there would be Ruth above me pointing a shotgun. I doubt they even owned a gun.

But I saw it anyway. Over and over like a record stuck in the final groove.

You're nuts, I kept thinking.

But I'd promised.

And as frightening as this was, today had scared me more. Looking at Ruth I'd finally seen all the way through to the end of it. Clearly and unmistakably. I'd finally seen Meg dying.

I don't know how long I stood there waiting on the porch.

Long enough to hear the tall Rose of Sharon scrape the house in a gentle breeze, to become aware of the frogs croaking from the brook and the crickets in the woods. Long enough for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and for the normalcy of frogs and crickets speaking to each other in the night to calm me. So that after a while what I finally felt was not so much the sheer terror I'd started with as excitement—excitement at finally doing something, something for Meg and for myself, and something no one I knew had ever done. It helped me to think about that. About the moment-by-moment present-tense reality of what I was doing.

If I did that I could make it into a sort of game. I was breaking into a house at night and people were sleeping. That was all. Not dangerous people. Not Ruth. Not the Chandlers.

Just people. I was a cat burglar. Cool and careful and stealthy. No one was going to catch me. Not tonight and not ever.

I opened the outer screen door.

It made barely a whimper.

The inner door was trickier. Its wood had expanded with humidity. I turned the handle and pressed my fingers against the doorjamb, my thumb against the door. I pushed slowly, gently.

It groaned.

I pushed harder and more steadily. I held tight to the handle, keeping a slight backward pressure so that when it did open it wouldn't pop and shudder.

It groaned some more.

I was sure the entire house was hearing this.

Everybody.

I still could run if I had to. It was good to know.

Then all of a sudden it opened. With even less noise than the screen had made.

I listened. "I stepped inside onto the landing, and I turned on the penlight. The stairs were cluttered with rags, mops, brushes, pails—stuff Ruth used for cleaning, along with jars of nails and paint cans and thinner. Luckily most of it lined just the one side, the side opposite the wall. I knew the stairs were going to be firmest and least creaky right next to the wall, where they'd have support. If I was going to get caught this was the likeliest place, the place there'd be the most noise. I stepped down carefully. At each stair I'd stop and listen. I'd vary the time between steps so there'd be no rhythm to it.

But each stair had its say.

"I It took forever.

Then finally I was at the bottom. By then my heart felt ready to burst. I couldn't believe they hadn't heard me.

I crossed to the shelter door.

The basement smelled of damp and mildew and laundry—and something like spilt sour milk.

I threw the bolt as quietly and evenly as possible.

Metal squealed against metal all the same.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

It was only then, I think, that I remembered what I was doing here in the first place.

Meg sat in the corner on her air mattress, her back against the wall, waiting. In the thin beam of light I could see how frightened she was. And how badly the day had gone for her.

They'd given her a thin rumpled shirt to put on and that was all. Her legs were bare.

Willie had been at them with the knife.

There were lines and scratches crisscrossed across her thighs and down her calves almost to her ankles.

There was blood on the shirt as well. Dried blood mostly—but not all. Some of it seeping through.

She stood up.

She walked toward me and I could see a fresh bruise on her temple.

For all of that she still looked firm and ready.

She started to say something but I put my finger to my lips, hushing her.

“I'll leave the bolt and the back door open,” I whispered.

“They'll think they just forgot. Give me maybe a half an hour. Stay to the wall side on the stairs and try not to run.

Donny's fast. He'd catch you. Here.”

I dug into my pocket and handed her the money. She looked at it. Then she shook her head.

“Better not,” she whispered.

“If something goes wrong and they find it on me they’ll know somebody’s been here.

We’d never get another chance. Leave it for me...” She thought for a moment.

“Leave it at the Big Rock. Put a stone on top of it or something. I’ll find it, don’t worry.”

“Where will you go?” I said.

“I don’t know. Not yet. Back to Mr. Jennings maybe.

Not too far. I want to stay close to Susan. I’ll find a way to let ‘3 you know as soon as I can.” “a ” You want the flashlight?”

She shook her head again.

“I know the stairs. You keep it. Go ahead. Go. Get out of here.”

I turned to leave.

“David?”

I turned again and she was suddenly next to me, reaching up. I saw the tears gleam bright in her eyes just as she closed them and kissed me.

Her lips were battered, broken, chapped and torn. They were the softest, most beautiful things that had ever touched me, that I had ever touched.

I felt my own tears come all in a rush.

“God! I’m sorry, Meg. I’m sorry.”

I could barely get it out. All I could do was stand there and shake my head and ask her to forgive me.

“David,” she said.

“David. Thank you. What you do last—that’s what counts.”

I looked at her. It was as though I were drinking her in, as though I were somehow becoming her.

I wiped my eyes, my face.

I nodded and turned to go.

Then I had a thought.

“Wait,” I said.

I stepped outside the shelter and ran the flashlight beam across the walls. I found what I was looking for. I took the tire iron off the nails and walked back and handed it to her.

“If you need to,” I said.

She nodded.

“Good luck, Meg,” I said and quietly closed the door.

And then I was in the midst of it again, in the close jarring silence of the sleeping house, moving slowly upward to the doorway, weighing each step against the creaking of beds and the whispers of the branches of trees.

And then I was out the door.

I ran across the yard to the driveway, cut through to the back of my house and into the woods. The moon was bright but I knew the path without the moon. I heard the water rushing full by the brook.

At the Rock I stooped to pick up some stones and lowered myself carefully down over the embankment. The surface of the water gleamed in the moonlight, shattered over the rocks. I stepped onto the Rock and dug into my pocket, put the money in a pile and weighed it down with a small neat pyramid of stones.

On the embankment I looked back.

The money and the stones looked pagan to me, like an offering.

Through the rich green scent of leaves I ran home.

And then I sat in bed and listened to my own house sleeping.

I thought it would be impossible to sleep but I hadn't counted on strain and exhaustion. I dropped off just after dawn, my pillow damp with sweat.

I slept badly—and late.

I looked at the clock and it was almost noon. I got into my clothes and ran downstairs, gulped down the requisite bowl of cereal because my mother was standing there complaining about people who slept all day and where it got them as adults—mostly jail and unemployment—and bolted out the door smack into the sticky August sunlight.

There was no way I dared going straight to the Chandlers'.

What if they'd figured it was me?

I ran through the woods to the Rock.

The little pyramid I'd made of stones and dollars was still there, In the light of day it no longer looked like an offering.

It looked like a pile of dogshit sitting on a pile of leaves. It sat there mocking me.

I knew what it meant. She hadn't got out.

They'd caught her.

She was still inside.

I felt this terrible sick feeling in my gut and the cereal nearly slid up again. I was angry and then I was scared and then I was plain confused. Suppose they had decided it was me who threw the bolt? Or suppose they'd done something to make Meg tell them?

What was I supposed to do now? a

Get out of town?

You could go to the cops, I thought. You could go see Mr. Jennings.

And then I thought, great, and tell him what? That Ruth's been torturing Meg for months and I know she has for a fact because I've sort of been helping?

I'd seen enough cop shows to know what an accomplice was.

And I knew a kid—a friend of my cousin's from West Orange—who'd done almost a year in Juvenile for getting drunk on beer and stealing his neighbor's car. According to him they could beat you, they could drug you, they could stick you in a straightjacket if they wanted to. And they let you out when they were damn good and ready.

There's got to be some other way, I thought.

Like Meg said about keeping the money—we could try again. Think it through better this time.

If they didn't know about me already.

There was only one way to find that out.

I climbed over to the Rock and gathered up the fives and singles and put them in my pocket.

Then I took a real deep breath.

And then I went over.

Willie met me at the door and it was clear that even if they knew or suspected, Willie had other more urgent things on his mind.

"Come on," he said.

He looked drawn and tired, excited though, the two combining to make him uglier than ever. You knew he hadn't washed and his breath was foul even for him.

"Close the door behind you."

I did.

We went downstairs.

And Ruth was there, sitting in her folding chair. And Woofer. Eddie and Denise perched on the worktable. And Susan sat bloodlessly silent crying next to Ruth.

Every one of them sitting quiet while on the cold damp concrete floor Donny lay grunting on top of Meg with his pants down around his ankles, raping her, her naked body tied hands and feet between the four-by-four support beams.

And I guessed Ruth had finally changed her mind once and for all about touching.

I felt sick.

I turned to get out of there.

“Unh-unh,” said Willie.

“You stay.”

And the carving knife in his hand and the look in his eyes said he was right. I stayed.

They were all so quiet in there you could hear the two flies buzzing.

It seemed like a bad sick dream. So I did what you do in a dream. Passively I watched it unfold.

Donny covered most of her. I could see only her lower body—her legs and thighs. Either they were very much bruised since yesterday or had gotten very dirty. The soles of her feet were black.

I could almost feel his weight on top of her, pressing down, pounding her to the rough hard floor. She was gagged but not blindfolded. Behind the gag I could hear her pain and the helpless outrage.

He groaned and arched suddenly and clutched her burned breast and then rolled slowly off her.

Beside me Willie breathed relief.

“There now,” said Ruth, nodding.

“That’s what you’re good for.”

Denise and Woofer giggled.

Donny pulled up his pants.He zipped them.He glanced at me but wouldn’t meet my eyes.I couldn’t blame him.I wouldn’t have met his either.

“You probably got the clap now,” Ruth said.

“But never mind.They’ve got cures these days.”

Susan suddenly started sobbing.

“Mommeee!”

She kept rocking back and forth in her chair.

“I want my mommeeee!”

“Oh, shut up why doncha?”said Woofer.

“Yeah,” said Eddie.

“Shut the fuck up,” said Ruth.

“Shut up!”

She kicked her chair.She backed up and kicked it again and Susan tumbled off it.She lay there screaming, scraping the floor with her braces.

“Stay there!”said Ruth.

“You just stay there!Stay where you are.”Then she looked around at the rest of us.

“Who else wants a turn?”she said.

“Davy?Eddie?”

“Me,” said Willie.

Ruth looked at him.

“I don’t know about that,” she said.

“Your brother’s just had her. Seems sorta like incest to me. I dunno.”

“Aw hell, Mom!” said Willie.

“Well, it does. Not that the little whore would give a damn. But I’d feel a whole lot better if it was Eddie or Davy.”

“Davy don’t want her for chrissake!”

“Sure he does.”

“No, he don’t!”

She looked at me. I looked away.

She shrugged.

“Maybe not. Boy’s sensible. I know I wouldn’t touch her. But then I’m not a man am I. Eddie?”

“I want to cut her,” said Eddie.

“Yeah. Me too!” said Woofer.

“Cut her?” Ruth looked puzzled.

“You said that we could cut her, Mrs. Chandler,” said Denise.

“I did?”

“Sure you did,” said Woofer.

“I did? When? Cut her how?”

“Hey. Come on, I want to fuck her,” said Willie.

“Shut up,” said Ruth.

“I’m talking to Ralphie.Cut her how?”

“Put something on her,” said Ralphie.

“So people’d know.So people’d know she was a whore.”

“That’s right.Like a scarlet letter or something,” said Denise.

“Like in the Classic Comic.”

“Oh, you mean like brand her,” said Ruth.

“You mean brand her, not cut her.”

“You said cut her,” said Woofer.

“Don’t tell me what I said.Don’t you tell your mother.”

“You did, Mrs.Chandler,” said Eddie.

“Honest.You said cut her.”

“I did?”

“I heard you.We all did.”

Ruth nodded.She thought about it.Then she sighed.

“Okay.We’ll want a needle.Ralphie, go up and get my sewing kit out of the... I think it’s in the hall closet.”

“Okay.”

He ran by me.

I couldn’t believe this was happening.

“Ruth,” I said.

“Ruth?”

She looked at me. Her eyes seemed to quiver, to shudder in their sockets.

“What.”

“You’re not really doing this, are you?”

“I said we could. So I guess we will.”

She leaned close to me. I could smell the cigarette smoke leaking from every pore.

“You know what the bitch tried to do last night?” she said.

“She tried to get out of here. Somebody left the door open. We figure it was Donny because he was the last one in yesterday and besides, Donny’s sweet on her. Always has been. So I finally let him have her. You have a woman, you don’t much want her anymore. I figure Donny’s cured now.

“But it’s good to let people see and know what she is.

Don’t you think?”

“Mow,” said Willie. He was whining now.

“What.”

“Why can’t I?”

“Can’t what?”

“Fuck her!”

“Because I said so, goddammit! It’s incest! Now you leave me the hell alone about it. You want to go skinny dipping into your own brother’s scum? That what you want?

Don’t talk to me. You’re disgusting! Just like your goddamn father.”

“Ruth,” I said.

“You... you can’t do this.”

* “Can’t?”

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

“It’s not... it’s not right.”

She got up. She walked over to me and I had to look at her. I had to look straight in her eye.

“Please don’t tell me what’s right, boy,” she said.

Her voice was a low trembling growl. I was aware of her shaking with a fury that was only barely under control.

The eyes flickered like guttering candles. I stepped backward.

I thought, my God, this was a woman I’d liked once. A woman I’d thought funny, sometimes even pretty. One of the guys.

This woman scared hell out of me.

She’ll kill you, I thought. She’ll kill us all including her own kids and not even care or think about it till later.

If she feels like it.

“Don’t you tell me,” she said.

And I think she knew what was in my mind then. I think she read me completely.

It didn’t concern her. She turned to Willie.

“This boy tries to leave,” she said.

“Cut his balls off and hand ‘em over here to me. You got that?”

Willie returned her smile.

“Sure, Mom,” he said.

Woofers came running into the room holding a battered cardboard shoebox. He handed it to Ruth.

“It wasn’t there,” he said.

“Huh?”

“It wasn’t in the closet. It was in the bedroom on the dresser.”

“Oh.”

She opened it. I caught a glimpse of jumbled twine and balls of thread, pincushions, buttons, needles. She put it down on the worktable and rummaged through it.

Eddie moved off the table to give her room and peered down over her shoulder.

“Here we go,” she said. She turned to Woofers.

“We have to heat this through, though, or she’ll get an infection.”

She held a long thick sewing needle.

The room was suddenly crackling with tension.

I looked at the needle and then at Meg lying on the floor and she was looking at it too and so was Susan.

“Who gets to do it?” said Eddie.

“Well, I guess to be fair you can each do a letter. That okay?”

“Great. What’ll we write?”

Ruth thought about it.

“Suppose we keep it simple. How ‘bout we write, ”I fuck. Fuck me.“ That ought to do it. That ought to tell whoever needs to know.”

“Sure,” said Denise.

“That’ll be great.” To me at that moment she looked just like Ruth. The same twitchy light in her eyes, the same tense expectancy.

“Wow,” said Woofer.

“That’s a lot of letters. Almost two each.”

Ruth counted, nodded.

“Actually,” she said, “if David doesn’t want in on this, and I suspect he doesn’t, you could make it two each and I’ll just take the one over. David?”

I shook my head.

“I figured,” said Ruth. But she didn’t seem angry or mocking about it.

“Okay,” said Ruth.

“I’ll take the I. Let’s do it.”

“Ruth?” I said.

“RuthV9 Willie moved closer to me, moving the carving knife in slow lazy circles right beneath my chin. He made me very nervous because you couldn’t tell with Willie. I looked at Eddie and watched him fiddle with the blade of his own Swiss Army knife, eyes cold and dead as I knew they’d be even before I looked. Then at Donny. It was a new Donny. There was no help from him either.

But Ruth just turned to me, still not angry, sounding calm and sort of weary. Almost like she were trying to tell me something I should have known all along, strictly for my own benefit. As though she were doing something really nice for me. As though of all the people here in this room, I was her favorite.

“David,” she said, “I’m telling you. Just leave this be.”

“I want to go, then,” I said.

“I want to get out of here.”

“No.”

“I don’t want to see this.”

“Then don’t look.”

They were going to do it to her. Woofer had matches.

He was heating the needle.

I was trying not to cry.

“I don’t want to hear it either.”

“Too bad,” she said.

“Unless you got wax in your ears you’ll hear it plenty.”

And I did.

When it was over and they’d finished swabbing her with the rubbing alcohol I walked over to see what they’d done. Not just this but last night and this morning too.

It was the first I’d been near her all day.

They’d removed the gag once they’d finished, knowing she was too weak now to say much anyhow. Her lips were puffy and swollen. One of her eyes was closing, turning red and purple. I saw three or four new cigarette burns on her chest and collarbone and one on her inner thigh. The triangular burn from Ruth’s iron was an open blister now.

There were bruises on her ribs and arms and over her calves and thighs where Willie’d cut her the day before.

And there were the words.

I FUCK FUCK ME

Two-inch letters. All in capitals. Half-burned and half cut deep into the flesh across her stomach.

Written in what looked like the shaky hesitant hand of a six-year-old schoolboy.

“Now you can’t get married,” said Ruth. She was sitting in her chair again, smoking, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. Willie and Eddie had gone upstairs for Cokes. The room stank of smoke and sweat and alcohol.

“See, it’s there forever, Meggy,” she said.

“You can’t

undress. Not for anybody, ever. Because he’ll see those words there.”

I looked and realized it was true.

Ruth had changed her.

Changed her for life.

The burns and bruises would fade but this would stay—legible, however faintly, even thirty years from now. It was something she’d have to think about and explain each and every time she stood naked in front of someone. Whenever she looked in a mirror she’d see it there and remember.

They’d passed a rule in school this year that said showers were mandatory after gym class. How could she handle that, in a roomful of teenage girls?

Ruth wasn’t worried. It was like Meg was her protegee now.

“You’re better off,” she said.

“You’ll see. No man will want you. You won’t have kids. It’ll be a whole lot better that way. You’re lucky. You thought it’s good to be cute? To be sexy? Well, I’ll tell you, Meggy. A woman’s better off loathsome in this world.”

Eddie and Willie came in laughing with a six-pack of Cokes and passed them around. I took one from them and held it, trying to keep the bottle steady. The faint sweet scent of caramel was sickening. One sip and I knew I’d vomit. I’d been trying not to ever since it started.

Donny didn’t take one. He just stood by Meg looking down.

“You’re right, Ma,” he said after a while.

“It makes things different. What we wrote I mean. It’s weird.”

He was trying to puzzle it out. Then finally he got a handle on it.

“She ain’t so much anymore,” he said.

He sounded a little surprised and even a little happy.

Ruth smiled. The smile was thin and shaky.

“I told you,” she said.

“You see?”

Eddie laughed, walked over and kicked her in the ribs.

Meg barely grunted.

“Nah. She ain’t much,” he said.

“She ain’t nothin

. “said Denise. She swigged her Coke.

Eddie kicked her again, harder this time, in full solidarity with his sister.

Get me out of here, I thought.

Please. Let me go.

“I guess we could string her up again now,” said Ruth.

“Let her stay,” said Willie.

“It’s cold down there. I don’t want no runny noses or no sneezing. Haul her back on up and let’s have a look at her.”

Eddie untied her feet and Donny freed her hands from the four-by-four but kept them tied together and looped the line over one of the nails in the ceiling.

Meg looked at me. You could see how weak she was.

Not even a tear. Not even the strength to cry. Just a sad defeated look that said, you see what's become of me?

Donny pulled on the line and raised her arms above her head. He tied it off at the worktable but left some slack this time. It was sloppy and unlike him—as though he didn't really care anymore. As though she wasn't worth the effort.

Something had changed all right.

It was as though in carving the letters across her they'd stripped her of all power to excite—to elicit either fear or lust or hate. What was left was so much flesh now. Weak. And somehow contemptible.

Ruth sat looking at her like a painter studying her canvas.

"There's one thing we should do," she said.

"What?" said Donny.

Ruth thought.

"Well," she said, "we got her so no man's gonna want her now. Problem is, see, Meg might still want him" She shook her head.

"Life of torment there."

"So?"

She considered. We watched her.

"Tell you what you do," she said finally.

"Go upstairs to the kitchen and get some newspapers off the pile there and bring 'em down. Bunch of 'em. Put 'em in the sink in back of us here."

"Why newspapers? What are we gonna do with newspapers?"

"Read to her?" said Denise. They laughed.

“Just do it,” she said.

He went up and got the papers and came back down.

He tossed them in the sink by the washer.

Ruth stood up.

“Okay. Who’s got a match? I’m out.”

“I got some,” said Eddie.

He handed them to her. She stooped and picked up the tire iron I’d given to Meg last night.

I wondered if she’d had any chance to use it.

“Here. Take this,” she said. She handed the iron to Eddie.

“Come on.”

They put down the Cokes and walked past me. Everybody wanted to see what Ruth had in mind. Everybody but me and Susan. But Susan just sat on the floor where Ruth had told her to sit and I had Willie’s knife about two feet from my ribcage.

So I went too.

“Roll ‘em up,” said Ruth. They looked at her.

“The papers,” she said.

“Roll ‘em up good and tight.

Then toss them back in the sink.”

Woofers, Eddie, Denise and Donny did as she said.

Ruth lit a cigarette with Eddie’s matches. Willie stayed behind me.

I glanced at the staircase just a few feet away.

Beckoning.

They rolled the papers.

“Pack ‘em down tight,” said Ruth.

They stuffed them into the sink.

“See, here’s the thing,” Ruth said.

“A woman doesn’t want a man all over her body.No.She only wants him one place in particular.Know what I mean, Denise?No?Not yet?

Well you will.Woman wants a man in one particular place and that’s right down here between her legs.“

She pointed, then pressed her hand to her dress to show them.They stopped rolling.

“One little spot,” she said.

“Now.You take out that spot, and you know what happens?You take out all of her desire.

“Really.You take it out forever.It just works.They do it some places all the time, like it’s just the usual thing to do, when a girl reaches a certain age I guess.Keeps her from strayin’.Places like, oh, I dunno, Africa and Arabia and New Guinea.They consider it a civilized practice down there.

“So I figure, why not here?We’ll just take out that one little spot.”

“We’ll burn her.Burn it out.We’ll use the iron.”

“And then she’ll be... perfect.”

The room was hushed as they stared at her a moment, not quite believing what they were hearing.

I believed her.

And the feeling I’d been trying to understand for days now finally came together

for me.

I started to tremble as though standing naked in a rude December wind. Because I could see it, smell it, hear her screams. I could see all the way down into Meg's future, into my future—the living consequences of such an act.

And I knew I was alone in that.

The others—even Ruth, for all the impulsiveness that had made her into a jailer, for all her inventiveness with pain, for all her talk of what might have been had she kept her job and not met Willie Sr. and not married and never had kids—the others had no imagination.

None. None whatever. They had no idea.

For everyone but themselves, for everything but the moment, they were blind, empty.

And I trembled, yes. With reason. With understanding.

I was captured by savages. I had lived with them. I'd been one of them.

No. Not savages. Not really.

Worse than that.

More like a pack of dogs or cats or the swarms of ferocious red ants that Woofer liked to play with.

Like some other species altogether. Some intelligence that only looked human, but had no access to human feelings.

I stood among them swamped by other ness

By evil.

I broke for the stairs.

I heard Willie curse and felt his knife graze the back of my shirt. I grabbed the wooden banister and twisted onto the stairs.

I stumbled. Below me I saw Ruth pointing, shouting, her mouth a wide black empty gaping hole. I felt Willie's hand grasp my foot and pull. Beside me were paint cans and a bucket. I swept them down the stairs behind me and heard him curse again and Eddie too as I wrenched my foot away. I got to my feet. I crashed blindly up the stairs.

The door was open. I flung open the screen.

The summer heat washed over me in a single heavy wave. I couldn't scream. I had to gasp for air. I heard them close behind me. I leapt down the stairs.

"Move!" Donny yelled.

Then suddenly he was on top of me, the momentum of his leap from the landing knocking me down and knocking the breath out of me and rolling him away from me. I was faster than he was. I got to my feet. I saw Willie to the side of me, blocking my way to my house. I saw the knife glint in the sunlight. I didn't try.

I ran past Donny's outstretched arms across the yard heading toward the woods.

I was halfway there when Eddie hit me, threw himself hard across the back of my legs. I went down and suddenly he was all over me, punching, kicking, trying to gouge my eyes. I rolled and twisted. I had weight on him. I wrestled him over.

He grabbed my shirt. I let it tear and pulled away. I stumbled back and then Donny was on me too and then Willie and it was only when I felt Willie's knife at my throat and felt it cut that I stopped struggling.

"Inside, cunt," he said.

"And not a fucking word!"

They marched me back.

The sight of my own house tormented me. I kept looking at it for signs of life but there weren't any.

We went up and then down into the cool, paint smelling dark.

I put my hand to my throat. My fingers came up wet with just a little blood.

Ruth stood there, arms folded tight across her breasts.

“Fool,” she said.

“Now where the hell were you going?”

I didn’t answer.

“Well, I guess you’re with her now,” she said.

“Don’t know what the hell we’re going to do with you all.”

She shook her head. Then she laughed.

“Just be glad you don’t have one of them little spots like she does.

“Course, then, you’ve got something else to worry about, don’t you?”

Denise laughed.

“Willie, you go get some rope. I think we better tie him up, in case he feels like wandering again.”

Willie went into the shelter. He came back with a short length of rope and handed Donny the knife. Donny held it while Willie tied my hands behind me.

Everybody watched and waited.

And this time Donny seemed to have no trouble at all looking me in the eye.

When they were through Ruth turned to Woofer and handed him the matches.

“Ralphie? You want the honors?”

Woofer smiled and lit a match and leaned way over the sink. He reached back and lit a corner of one of the rolled-up papers. Then he lit another corner nearer to him.

He stepped back. The paper began to burn brightly.

“You always did like a fire,” said Ruth. She turned to the rest of them. She sighed.

“Who wants to do this now?” she said.

“7 do” said Eddie.

She looked at him, smiling a little. It seemed to me the very same look that once, not long ago at all, had been pretty much reserved for me.

I guess I wasn’t her favorite kid on the block anymore.

“Get the tire iron,” she said.

And Eddie did.

They held it to the flames. It was very quiet.

When she judged it was hot enough she told him to remove it and we all went back inside.

I’m not going to tell you about this.

I refuse to.

There are things you know you’ll die before telling, things you know you should have died before ever having seen.

I watched and saw.

We lay huddled together in the dark.

They’d removed the work light and closed the door and we were alone, Meg and Susan and I, lying on the air mattresses that Willie Sr. had provided for his family.

I could hear footsteps passing from the living room to the dining room and back again. Heavy footsteps. Donny or Willie. Then the house was silent.

Except for Meg’s moaning.

She’d fainted when they touched her with the iron, gone rigid and then suddenly limp as though struck by a bolt of lightning. But now some part of her was struggling toward consciousness again. I was afraid to think what it would be like

for her once she woke.I couldn't imagine the pain.Not that pain.I didn't want to.

They'd untied us.At least our hands were free.

I could tend to her somehow.

I wondered what they were doing up there now.What they were thinking. I could picture them.Eddie and Denise would have gone home for dinner.Ruth would be lying in the chair with her feet up on the hassock, a cigarette burning in the ashtray beside her, staring, at the blank screen of the television.Willie sprawled across the couch, eating.Woofer on his belly on the floor.And Donny sitting upright on one of the straight-back kitchen chairs, having an apple maybe.

There would be frozen TV dinners in the oven.

I was hungry.I'd had nothing since breakfast now.

Dinner.I thought about that.

When I failed to come home to eat my parents would be angry.Then they'd start to worry.

My parents would worry.

I doubt that it had ever occurred to me before exactly what that meant.

And for a moment I loved them so much I almost cried.

Then Meg moaned again and I could feel her tremble beside me.

I thought of Ruth and the others sitting in the silence upstairs. Wondering what to do with us.

Because my being here changed everything.

After today they couldn't trust me.And unlike Meg and Susan, I'd be missed.

Would my parents come looking for me?Sure, of course they would.But when Would they look for me here?I hadn't told them where the hell I'd be.

Dumb, David.

Another mistake. You knew you might be in trouble here.

I felt the darkness press tight around me, making me smaller somehow, crimping my space and limiting my options, my potential. And I had some small sense of what it must have felt like for Meg all these weeks, all alone down here.

You could almost wish for them to come back again just to relieve the tension of waiting, the sense of isolation.

In the darkness, I realized, you tend to disappear.

“David?”

It was Susan and she startled me. I think it was the only time I’d ever heard her speak to me—or to anybody for that matter—without being spoken to first.

Her voice was a scared trembly whisper. As though Ruth were still at the door listening.

“David?”

“Yeah? You okay, Susan?”

“I’m okay. David? Do you hate me?”

“Hate you? No, ”course not. Why should I... ?“

“You should. Meg should. Because it’s my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Susan.”

“Yes it is. It’s all my fault. Without me Meg could have gone and not come back.”

“She tried to, Susan. They caught her.”

“You don’t understand.”

Even without seeing her you could tell how hard she was trying not to cry.

“They caught her in the hall, David.”

“Huh?”

“She came to get me. She got out, somehow.”

“I let her out. I left the door open.”

“And she came up the stairs and into my room and put her hand here, over my mouth so I’d be quiet and she lifted me up off the bed. And she was carrying me down the hall when Ruth, when Ruth...”

She couldn’t hold back anymore. She cried. I reached out and touched her shoulder.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s all right.”

“... when Ruth came out of the boys’ room—I guess she heard us, you know—and she grabbed Meg by the hair and threw her down and I fell right on top of her so she couldn’t move at first and then Willie came out and Donny and Woofer and they started beating her and hitting her and kicking her. And then Willie went into the kitchen and got a knife and put it right here to her throat and said that if she moved he’d cut off her head. He’d cut her head off what he said.

“Then they took us downstairs. Later they threw my braces down. This one’s busted.”

I heard it rattle.

“And then they hit her some more and Ruth used her cigarette on her... on her...”

She slid over and I put my arm around her while she cried into my shoulder.

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“She was going to come back for you. We were going to figure something out. Why now?”

Why’d she try to take you? Why’d she try to take you with her?”

She wiped her eyes. I heard her sniffle.

“I think because... Ruth,” she said.

“Ruth...

touches me. Down... you know... down there. And once she... she made me bleed. And Meg... I told Meg... and she got mad about it... real mad and she told Ruth she knew and Ruth beat her again, beat her bad with a shovel from the fireplace and...”

Her voice broke.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it. She should have gone!

She should have! I didn’t mean for her to get hurt. I couldn’t help it! I hate it when she touches me! I hate Ruth! I hate her.

And I told Meg... I told her what she did and that’s why they got her. That’s why she came for me. Because of me. David.

Because of we!”

I held her and it was like rocking a baby she felt so frail.

“Shhh. Easy. It’ll be... okay.”

I thought of Ruth touching her. I could picture it. The broken, helpless little girl, unable to fight, the woman with the empty glittering eyes like the surface of a fast-running stream. Then I blocked it from my mind.

After a long while she subsided.

“I have something,” she said, sniffing.

“I gave it to Meg. Reach over behind the far leg of the worktable. Past where Meg is. Feel around.”

I did. I came up with a pack of matches and the two inch stub of a candle.

“Where’d you... ?”

“I took it off of Ruth.”

I lit the candle.Its honey glow filled the shelter.It made me feel better.

Until I saw Meg.

Until we both did.

She lay on her back, covered to the waist with an old thin dirty sheet they'd thrown over her.Her breasts and shoulders were bare.She had bruises everywhere.Her burns were open, liquid, oozing.

Even in her sleep the muscles of her face pulled her skin tight with pain.Her body trembled.

The writing glistened.

I FUCK FUCK ME

I looked at Susan and could see she was going to cry again.

“Turn away,” I said.

Because it was bad.All of it was bad.

But worst of all was not what they'd done to her, but what she was doing to herself.

Her arms were outside the sheet.She slept.

And the dirty jagged fingernails of her hand worked constantly and deep against her left elbow all the way down to her wrist.

She was tearing at the scar.

Tearing it open.

The body, abused and beaten, was turning finally against itself.

“Don't look,” I said.I took off my shirt and managed to bite and rip my way through the seam.I tore two strips off the bottom.I moved Meg's fingers away.I wrapped the shirt tightly twice around her arm. Then I tied it off top and

bottom. She couldn't do much damage now.

"Okay," I said.

Susan was crying. She'd seen it. Enough to know.

"Why?" she said.

"Why would she do that?"

"I don't know."

But I did, in a way. I could almost feel Meg's anger at herself. For failing. For failing to get free, for failing herself and her sister. Maybe even for being the sort of person this could happen to in the first place. For allowing it to happen and thinking she'd get through it somehow.

It was unfair and wrong of her to feel that way but I thought I understood.

She'd been tricked—and now that good clear mind was angry with itself. How could I have been so stupid? Almost if she deserved her punishment now. She'd been tricked into thinking Ruth and the others were human in the same way she was human and that consequently it could only go so far.

Only so far. And it wasn't true. They weren't the same at all.

She'd realized that. Too late.

I watched the fingers probe the scar.

There was blood seeping through the shirt. Not too much yet. But I felt the strange sad irony of knowing I might have to use the shirt to tie her up again eventually in order to restrain her.

Upstairs, the phone rang.

"Get it," I heard Ruth say. Footsteps crossed the room. I heard Willie's voice and then a pause and then Ruth's voice, speaking into the phone.

I wondered what time it was. I looked at the tiny candle and wondered how long it would last.

Meg's hand fell away from the scar.

She gasped and groaned. Her eyelids fluttered.

"Meg?"

She opened her eyes. They were glazed with pain.

Her fingers went back to the scar again.

"Don't," I said.

"Don't do that."

She looked at me, not comprehending at first. Then she took her hand away.

"David?"

"Yes. It's me. And Susan's here."

Susan leaned forward so she could see her and the corners of Meg's mouth turned upward in the palest ghost of a smile. Then even that seemed to pain her.

She groaned.

"Oh God," she said.

"It hurts."

"Don't move," I said.

"I know it does."

I drew the sheet up to her chin.

"Is there anything... anything you want me to...?"

"No," she said.

"Just let me... Oh God."

“Meg?” said Susan. She was trembling. She reached across me but couldn’t quite reach her.

“I’m sorry, Meg. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Suz. We tried. It’s okay. It’s...”

You could almost feel the electric pain run through her.

I couldn’t think what to do. I kept looking at the candle as though the light would tell me something but it didn’t. Nothing.

“Where... where are they?” she said. H “Upstairs.”

“Will they stay? Is it... night?”

“Almost. Around dinnertime. I don’t know. I don’t know if they’ll stay.”

“I can’t... David? I can’t take any more. You know?”

“I know.”

“I can’t.”

“Rest. Just rest.” I shook my head.

“What?” she said.

“I keep wishing there were something...”

“What?”

“... to hurt them with. To get us out of here.”

“There’s nothing. Nothing. You don’t know how many nights I...”

“There’s this,” said Susan.

She held up the arm brace.

I looked at it. She was right. It was lightweight aluminum but if you took the pole

end and swung the jointed brace you could do some damage.

Not enough, though. Not against Willie and Donny both. And Ruth. You couldn't underestimate her. Maybe if they were nice enough to come in one at a time with a couple minutes' breather space in between I might have had a shot but that was damn unlikely. I was never much of a fighter anyway.

All you had to do was ask Eddie.

We'd need something else.

I looked around. They'd removed mostly everything.

The fire extinguisher, radio, the food cartons, even the alarm clock and air pump for the mattresses were gone. They'd even taken the lengths of clothesline they tied us with. All we had was the worktable—almost too heavy to move alone much less throw—the mattresses, Meg's sheet, her plastic drinking cup and the clothes on our backs. And the matches and candle.

And then I saw a use for the matches and candle.

At least we could get them down here when we wanted them and not whenever they felt like it. We could confuse and surprise them. That was something. Something.

I took a deep breath. An idea was forming.

"Okay," I said.

"You want to try a couple things?"

Susan nodded. Weakly, so did Meg.

"It may not work. But it's possible."

"Go," Meg said.

"Do it." She moaned.

"Don't move," I said.

“I don’t need you.”

“Okay. Just do it,” she said.

“Get them.”

I took off my Keds high-tops and pulled out the shoelaces and tied them together. Then I took off Susan’s shoes and tied their laces to my own so that I had about twelve feet of line to work with. I slipped one end around the lower hinge of the door and tied it off tight and ran the line over to the first of the four-by-four support beams, and tied it off there about three inches from the floor. It gave me a tripwire running at a slight angle from door to beam, cutting off about a third of the left-hand side of the room as you entered.

“Listen,” I said.

“This is gonna be hard. And dangerous.

I mean it’s not just gonna be them. I want to build a fire here. Right over there in front of the table just short of midway through the room. They’ll smell the smoke and come down. And hopefully somebody will hit that line there.

Meantime I can stand on the other side over by the door with one of Susan’s braces.

“But there’ll be lots of smoke and there’s not much air. They better come fast or we’re in trouble. See what I mean ?”

“We’ll yell,” said Susan.

“Yeah. I hope that’ll do it. But we’ve got to wait a little while so they smell the smoke. People get panicky around fire and it’ll help. What do you think?”

“What can / do?” said Susan.

I had to smile.

“Not too much, Suz.”

She thought about it, the delicate little-girl features very grave.

“I know what I can do. I could stand over here by the mattresses and if anybody tries to come by I can trip ‘em!”

“Okay but watch yourself. No more broken bones.

And make sure you give me plenty of room to swing that thing.”

“I will.”

“Meg? Is this okay with you?”

She looked pale and weak. But she nodded.

“Anything,” she said.

I pulled off my T-shirt.

“I’ll... I’ll need the sheet,” I said.

“Take it.”

I drew it carefully off her.

She moved her hands to cover where they’d burned her. But not before I saw the black-red glistening wound. I winced and Meg saw me and turned her face away. Through the shirt she started working on the scar again. I didn’t have the heart to stop her—to call attention to what she was doing.

And suddenly I couldn’t wait to use that brace on someone. I bundled up the sheet and placed it where I wanted it in front of the table. I placed my T-shirt and socks on top.

“Mine too,” said Susan.

They wouldn’t make much difference but she needed to help so I took them off her and threw them on too.

“You want the shirt?” said Meg.

“No. You keep that.”

“All right,” she said. The fingernails kept digging.

Her body looked old, the muscles thin and slack. I took the brace from Susan and stood it against the wall by the door. Then I picked up the stub of candle and walked over to the pile.

My stomach knotted with fear.

“Let’s go,” I said and brought the candle down.

The fire burned low but there was smoke all right. It plumed to the ceiling and billowed outward. Our own mushroom cloud, inside the shelter.

In seconds it filled the room. I could hardly see across to Meg lying on the floor. Our coughing was for real.

As the smoke got thicker so was our shouting.

You could hear the voices up there. Confusion. Fear.

Then the tumble of footsteps down the stairs. They were running. They were worried. That was good. I held tight to the brace and waited just beside the door.

Someone fumbled at the bolt. Then the door flew open and Willie stood in the light from the cellar swearing while the smoke washed over him like a sudden fog. He lurched inside. He hit the line of shoelaces and stumbled, fell and skidded across the floor into the pile headfirst, screaming, flailing at the rag burning on his cheek and the sizzling greasy flattop that was melting down his forehead.

Ruth and Donny pushed in shoulder to shoulder, Donny closest to me, trying to make out what was happening through the smoke. I swung the brace. I saw blood fly off Donny’s head flecking Ruth and the doorway as he fell, grabbing for me. I brought the brace down like an ax but he pulled away. The brace crashed to the floor. Then suddenly Ruth was darting past me heading for Susan.

Susan. Her pawn. Her shield.

I whirled and swung the brace and caught her across the ribs and back but it wasn’t enough to stop her.

She was fast.I was after her, swinging the brace up from the floor like a backhand shot at tennis, but she reached for Susan's scrawny chest and pushed her against the wall, then reached into her hair and jerked it back.I heard a thump like a dropped pumpkin and Susan slid down the wall.

I whipped the brace across Ruth's lower back with everything I had. She howled and fell to her knees.

I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye.I turned.³ Donny was up, coming at me through the thinning smoke.Then Willie.

I whipped the brace back and forth in front of me.

They moved slowly at first, carefully.They were close enough so I could see how Willie's face was burned, one eye closed and streaming tears.There was blood on Donny's shirt.i Then Willie came in low, rushing me.I swung the brace and it slammed across his shoulder, ran up and clattered to a jarring stop against his neck.He screeched and fell.

“I

I saw Donny lurch forward and pulled the brace around, I heard a scrabbling sound behind me.

Ruth hurled herself at my back, clawing at me, hissing like a cat.I stumbled under the twisting weight.My knees buckled.I fell.Donny moved forward and I felt a sudden searing pain across my cheek and my neck snapped back.I suddenly smelled of leather.Shoe leather.He'd kicked me like you kick a football.I saw a blinding light.My fingers tried to tighten against the brace but it wasn't there anymore.It was gone. The bright light faded fast to black.I scrambled to my knees.He kicked me in the stomach.I went down, gasping for air.I tried to get up again but my balance was wrong.I felt a wave of sickness and confusion.Then someone else was kicking me too, my ribs, my chest.I pulled myself into a ball, drew my muscles tight and waited for the dark to clear.And still they were kicking me and swearing.But it was beginning to work, I was beginning to see, finally enough so that I knew where the table was so I rolled to it, rolled beneath it, looking out and up at Ruth's legs and Donny's in front of me—and then I was confused again because there were another pair of legs standing where Meg should be, right where Meg should be lying on the mat.

Naked legs.Burned and scarred.

Meg's.

“No!”I yelled.

I moved out from under.Ruth and Donny turned, moved toward her.

“You!”Ruth screamed.

“You!You!You!” And I still don't know what Meg thought she was doing, if she actually thought she could help—maybe she was just sick of this, sick of Ruth and sick to death of the pain, sick of everything—but she should have known where all Ruth's fury would go, not toward me or toward Susan but straight to her like some evil perfect poison arrow.

But there wasn't any fear in her.Her eyes were hard and clear.And weak as she was she managed one step forward.

Ruth rushed against her like a madwoman.Grabbed her head between both hands like an evangelist, healing.

And then smashed it against the wall.

Meg's body began to tremble.

She looked at Ruth, straight into her eyes, and for a moment her eyes held a puzzled expression, as though even now she was asking Ruth why. Why.

Then she fell.Straight to the air mattress like a boneless sack.

She trembled a little longer and then stopped.

I reached for the table for support.

Ruth just stood staring at the wall.Like she didn't believe Meg wasn't still standing there.Her face an ashy white.

Donny and Willie were standing too.

The silence in the room was sudden and immense.

Donny bent down.He put his hand to her lips, then onto her chest.

“Is she... breathing?”

I’d never heard Ruth so small.

“Yeah.A little.”

Ruth nodded.

“Cover her up,” she said.

“Cover her.

Get her covered.“

She nodded again to no one in particular and then turned and walked across the room as carefully and slowly as though walking through broken glass.At the doorway she stopped to steady herself.Then she walked away.

And then it was just us kids.

Willie was the first to move.

“I’ll get some blankets,” he said.

He had his hand to his face covering his eye.Half his hair was burned away.

But nobody seemed angry anymore.

In front of the table the fire still smoldered, sending up wisps of smoke.

“Your mother called,” Donny muttered.

He was staring down at Meg.

“Huh?”

“Your mother,” he said.

“She called.Wanted to know where you were.I answered the phone. Ruth talked

to her.”

I didn’t have to ask what she’d told her. They hadn’t seen me.

“Where’s Woofer?”

“He ate at Eddie’s.”

I picked up the arm brace and brought it over to Susan. I don’t think she knew or cared. She was looking at Meg, quietly crying. Willie came back with the blankets. He looked at each of us a moment and dumped the blankets on the floor and then turned and went out again.

We heard him trudging up the stairs.

“What are you gonna do, Donny?” I asked him.

“I dunno,” he said.

His voice seemed flat and unfocused, stunned—as if he’d been the one kicked in the head instead of me.

“She could die,” I said.

“She will die. Unless you do something. Nobody else will. You know that. Ruth won’t.

Willie won’t.”

“I know.”

“So do something.”

“What?”

“Something. Tell somebody. The cops.”

“I dunno,” he said.

He took one of the blankets off the floor and covered her as Ruth had told him to. He covered her very gently.

“I dunno,” he said. He shook his head.

Then he turned.

“I gotta go.”

“Leave us the work light, huh? At least do that? So we can take care of her?”

He seemed to think a moment.

“Yeah. Sure,” he said.

“And some water? A rag and some water?”

“Okay.”

He went out into the cellar and I heard the water running. He came back with a bucket and some dust rags and put them on the floor. Then he hung the work light from the hook in the ceiling. He didn't look at us. Not once.

He reached for the door.

“I'll see you,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“See you.”

And then he closed the door.

The long chilly night drew on.

We received no more visits from above.

The house was quiet. We could dimly hear the radio going in the boys' room, the Everly's singing “All I Have To Do Is Dream,” Elvis's “Hard Headed Woman.”

Every song mocked us.

By now my mother would be frantic. I could imagine her calling every single house on the block to see if I was there, camping out or just staying overnight

somewhere without telling her. Then my father would call the police. I kept expecting that official-sounding knock at the door. I couldn't imagine why they hadn't come.

Hope turned to frustration, frustration to anger, anger to a dull resignation. Then the cycle began again. There was nothing to do but wait and bathe Meg's face and forehead.

She was feverish. The back of her head was sticky with crusting blood.

We drifted in and out of sleep.

My mind kept latching on to sing songs jingles. Use Ajax! The foaming cleanser-da-da-da-da-da-dum-dum. Wash the dirt right down the drain-da-da-da-da-da-dum. Over the river and through the woods... the river and through the woods... the river and through the... I couldn't hold on to anything. I couldn't let go of anything, either.

Sometimes Susan would start to cry.

Sometimes Meg would shuffle and moan.

I was happy when she'd moan. It meant she was alive.

She woke twice.

The first time she woke I was running the cloth over her face and was just about to quit for a while when she opened her eyes. I almost dropped it I was so surprised. Then I hid it behind me because it was pink with blood and I didn't want her to see. Somehow the idea really bothered me.

"David?"

"Yeah."

She seemed to listen. I looked down into her eyes and saw that one of her pupils was half again as large as the other—and I wondered what she was seeing.

"Do you hear her?" she said.

“Is she... there?”

“I only hear the radio.She’s there, though.”

“The radio.Yes.”She nodded slowly.

“Sometimes I hear her,” she said.

“All day long.

Willie and Woofer too..and Donny.I used to think I could listen... and hear and learn something, figure out why she was doing this to me... by listening to her walk across a room, or sit in a chair.I... never did.“

“Meg?Listen.I don’t think you ought to be talking, you know? You’re hurt pretty bad.”

It was a strain, you could see that.There was a slurring to her words, as though her tongue had suddenly become the wrong size for her.

“Unh-unh,” she said.

“No.I want to talk.I never talk.

I never have anybody to talk to.But... ?“

She looked at me strangely.

“How come you’re here?”

“We’re both here.Me and Susan both.They locked us in.Remember?”

She tried to smile.

“I thought maybe you were a fantasy.I think you’ve been that before for me sometimes.I have a lot... a lot of fantasies.I have them and then they... go away.And then sometimes you try to have one, you want one, and you can’t.

You can’t think of anything.And then later... you do.

“I used to beg her, you know?To stop.Just to let me go.I thought, she’s got to,

she'll do it a while and then she'll let me go, she'll see she should like me, and then I thought no she won't stop, I've got to get out but I can't, I don't understand her, how could she let him burn me?"

"Please, Meg..."

She licked her lips. She smiled.

"You're taking care of me though, aren't you."

"Yes."

"And Susan too."

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"She's sleeping."

"It's hard for her too," she said.

"I know. I know it is."

I was worried. Her voice was getting weaker. I had to bend very close now in order to hear her.

"Do me a favor?" she said.

"Sure."

She gripped my hand. Her grip was not strong.

"Get my mother's ring back? You know my mother's ring? She won't listen to me. She doesn't care. But maybe..."

Could you ask her? Could you get me back my ring?"

"I'll get it."

"You promise?"

“Yes.”

She let go.

“Thanks,” she said.

Then a moment later she said, “You know?I never really loved my mother enough.Isn’t that strange?Did you?”

“No.I guess not.”

She closed her eyes.

“I think I’d like to sleep now.”

“Sure,” I said.

“You rest.”

“It’s a funny thing,” she said.

“There’s no pain.You’d think there would be.They burned me and burned me but there’s no pain.”

“Rest,” I said.

She nodded.And then she did.And I sat listening for Officer Jennings’s knock, the lyrics to “Green Door” riding absurdly through my head like a garish painted carousel, round and round:... midnight, one more night without sleepin’/watchin’, “til the morning comes creepin’ I green door, what’s that secret you’re keepin’?I green door?!

Until I slept too.

When I woke it was probably dawn.

Susan was shaking me.

“Stop her!”she said, her voice a frightened whisper.

“Stop her!Please!Don’t let her do that!”

For a moment I thought I was home in my bed.

I looked around.I remembered.

And Meg wasn't there beside me anymore.

My heart began to pound, my throat tightened.

Then I saw her.

She'd thrown off the blanket so she was naked, hunched over in the corner by the worktable.Her long matted hair hung down across her shoulders.Her back was streaked with dull brown stains, crisscross channels of drying blood.

The back of her head gleamed wetly under the work light.

I could see the muscles pull along her shoulders and outward from the elegant line of vertebrae as she worked.I heard the scrabble of fingernails.

I got up and went to her.

She was digging.

Digging with her fingers at the concrete floor where it met the cinderblock wall.Tunneling out.Tiny sounds of exertion escaping her.Her fingernails broken back and bleeding, one gone already, the tips of her fingers bloody too, her blood mixing with the grit she dug from the flaking concrete in an uneven yielding of the substances of each.Her final refusal to submit.Her final act of defiance.The will rising up over a defeated body, to force itself on solid stone.

The stone was Ruth.Impenetrable—yielding just grit and fragments.

Ruth was the stone.

"Meg.Come on.Please."I said.

I put my hands under her arms and lifted her up.She came away as easily as an infant child.

Her body felt warm and full of life.

I laid her back on the mattress again and covered her with the blanket. Susan handed me the bucket and I bathed her fingertips. The water turned redder.

I began to cry.

I didn't want to cry because Susan was there but it wasn't anything I could help or hinder. It just came, flowed, like Meg's blood across the cinderblock.

Her heat was fever. Her heat had been a lie.

I could almost smell the death on her.

I had seen it in the expanded pupil of her eye, a widening hole into which a mind could disappear.

I bathed her fingers.

When I was finished I shifted Susan over so she could lie between us and we lay together quietly watching her shallow breathing, each breath of air flowing through her lungs another moment binding the moments together, another few seconds' grace, the flickering of her half-open eyelids speaking of the life that roiled gently beneath the wounded surface—and when she opened her eyes again we weren't startled. We were happy to see Meg there looking out at us, the old Meg, the one who lived before this in the very same time as we did and not in this fevered dream-space.

She moved her lips. Then smiled.

"I think I'm going to make it," she said, and reached for Susan's hand.

"I think I'll be fine."

In the artificial glare of the work light, in the dawn that for us was not a dawn, she died.

The knock at the door could not have come more than an hour and a half later.

I heard them rising from their beds. I heard masculine voices and heavy unfamiliar footsteps crossing the living room to the dining room and coming down the stairs.

They threw the bolt and opened the door and Jennings was there, along with my father and another cop named Thompson who we knew from the VFW. Donny, Willie, Woofer and Ruth stood behind them, making no attempt to escape or even to explain, just watching while Jennings went to Meg and raised her eyelid and felt for the pulse that wasn't there.

My father came over and put his arm around me.

Jesus Christ he said, shaking his head. Thank God we found you. Thank God we found you. I think it was the first time I'd ever heard him use the words but I also think he meant it.

Jennings pulled the blanket up over Meg's head and Officer Thompson went to comfort Susan, who couldn't stop crying. She'd been quiet ever since Meg died and now the relief and sadness were pouring out of her.

Ruth and the others watched impassively.

Jennings, who Meg had warned about Ruth on the Fourth of July, looked ready to kill.

Red-faced, barely controlling his voice, he kept shooting questions at her—and you could see it wasn't so much questions he wanted to shoot as the pistol he kept stroking on his hip. How'd this happen? how'd that happen?

how long has she been down here? who put that writing there?

For a while Ruth wouldn't answer. All she'd do was stand there scratching at the open sores on her face. Then she said, "I want a lawyer."

Jennings acted like he didn't hear her. He kept on with the questions but all she'd say was, "I want to call a lawyer," like she was preparing to take the Fifth and that was that.

Jennings got madder and madder. But that didn't help. I could have told him that.

Ruth was the rock.

And following her example so were her kids.

I wasn't. I took a deep breath and tried not to think about my father standing beside me.

"I'll tell you everything you want to know," I said.

"Me and Susan will."

"You saw all this?"

"Most," I said.

"Some of these wounds occurred weeks ago. You see any of that?"

"Some of it. Enough."

"You saw it?"

"Yes."

His eyes narrowed.

"Are you kept or keeper here, kid?" he said.

I turned to my father.

"I never hurt her, Dad. I never did. Honest."

"You never helped her, either," said Jennings.

It was only what I'd been telling myself all night long.

Except that Jennings's voice clenched at the words like a fist and hurled them at me. For a moment they took my breath away.

There's correct and then there's right, I thought.

"No," I said.

"No, I never did."

"You tried," said Susan, crying.

“Did he?” said Thompson.

Susan nodded.

Jennings looked at me another long moment and then he nodded too.

“Okay,” he said.

“We’ll talk it over later. We better call in, Phil. Everybody upstairs.”

Ruth murmured something.

“What?” asked Jennings.

She was talking into her chest, mumbling.

“I can’t hear you, lady.”

Ruth’s head shot up, eyes glaring.

“I said she was a slut,” said Ruth.

“She wrote those words! She did!

“I FUCK. FUCK ME.” You think I wrote ‘em? She wrote ‘em herself, on herself, because she was proud of it!

“I was tryin’ to teach her, to discipline her, to show her some decency. She wrote it just to spite me, ” I FUCK.

FUCK ME. “And she did, she fucked everybody. She fucked him, that’s for sure.”

She pointed at me. Then at Willie and Donny.

“And him and him too. She fucked ‘em all! She’d have fucked little Ralphie if I hadn’t stopped her, hadn’t tied her up down here where nobody had to see her legs and her ass and her cunt, her cunt-because, mister, that’s all she was was a cunt, woman who don’t know any better than to give in to a man any time he asks her for a piece of pussy. And I did her a goddamn favor. So fuck you and what you think.

Goddamn meat in a uniform.Big soldier.Big shit.Fuck you!

I did her a goddamn favor..."

"Lady," said Jennings.

"I think you should shut up now."

He leaned in close and it was like he was looking at something he'd stepped in on the sidewalk.

"You understand my meaning, lady?Mrs.Chandler?

Please, I really hope you do.That piss trap you call a mouth—you keep it shut."

He turned to Susan.

"Can you walk, honey?"

She sniffed.

"If somebody helps me up the stairs."

"Just as soon carry her," said Thompson.

"She won't weigh much."

"Okay.You first, then."

Thompson picked her up and headed out through the door and up the stairs.Willie and Donny followed him, staring down at their feet as though unsure of the way.My dad went up behind them, like he was part of the police now, watching them, and I followed him.Ruth came up right behind me, hard on my heels as if in a hurry to get this over with now all of a sudden.I glanced over my shoulder and saw Woofer coming up practically at her side, and Officer Jennings behind him.

Then I saw the ring.

It sparkled in the sunlight pouring in through the backdoor window.

I kept on going up the stairs but for a moment I was barely aware of where I was. I felt heat rushing through my body. I kept seeing Meg and hearing her voice making me promise to get her mother's ring back for her, to ask Ruth for it as though it didn't belong to Meg in the first place but was only on loan to her, as though Ruth had any right to it, as though she wasn't just a fucking thief, and I thought of all Meg must have been through even before we met her, losing the people she loved, with only Susan left—and then to get this substitute. This parody of a mother. This evil joke of a mother who had stolen not just the ring from her but everything, her life, her future, her body—and all in the name of raising her, while what she was doing was not raising but pushing down, pushing her further and further and loving it, exulting in it, coming for God's sake—down finally into the very earth itself which was where she'd lie now, wn-raised, erased, vanished.

But the ring remained. And in my sudden fury I realized I could push too.

I stopped and turned and raised my hand to Ruth's face, fingers spread wide, and watched the dark eyes look at me amazed for a moment and afraid before they disappeared beneath my hand.

I saw her know.

And want to live.

I saw her grope for the banister.

I felt her mouth fall open.

For a moment I felt the loose cold flesh of her cheeks beneath my fingers.

I was aware of my father continuing up the stairs ahead of me. He was almost to the top now.

I pushed.

I have never felt so good or so strong, then or since.

Ruth screamed and Woofer reached for her and so did Officer Jennings but the first step she hit was Jennings's and she twisted as she hit and he barely touched her. Paint cans tumbled to the concrete below. So did Ruth, a little more slowly.

Her mouth cracked open against the stairs. The momentum flung her up and around like an acrobat so that when she hit bottom she hit face-first again, mouth, nose and cheek bursting under the full weight of her body tumbling down after her like a sack of stones.

I could hear her neck snap.

And then she lay there.

A sudden stink filled the room. I almost smiled. She'd shit herself like a baby and I thought that was most appropriate, that was fine.

Then everybody was downstairs instantly, Donny and Willie, my dad and Officer Thompson minus the burden of Susan pushing past me, and everybody yelling and surrounding Ruth like she was some sort of find in an archaeological dig. What happened? What happened to my mother! Willie was screaming and Woofer was crying, Willie really losing it, crouched over her, hands clutching her breasts and belly, trying to massage her back to life. What the fuck happened! yelled Donny. All of them looking up the stairs at me like they wanted to tear me limb from limb, my father at the base of the stairs just in case they tried to.

"So what did happen?" asked Officer Thompson.

Jennings just looked at me. He knew. He knew damn well what happened.

But I didn't care just then. I felt like I'd swatted a wasp. One that had stung me. Nothing more and nothing worse than that.

I walked down the stairs and faced him.

He looked at me some more. Then he shrugged.

"The boy stumbled," he said.

"No food, lack of sleep, his friend dying. An accident. It's a damn shame. It happens sometimes."

Woofer and Willie and Donny weren't buying that but nobody seemed to care about them much today and what they were buying and what they weren't.

The smell of Ruth's shit was terrible.

"I'll get us a blanket," said Thompson. He moved past me.

"That ring," I said. I pointed.

"The ring on her finger was Meg's. It belonged to Meg's mother. It should go to Susan now. Can I give it to her?"

Jennings gave me a pained look that said enough was enough and not to push it.

But I didn't worry about that either.

"The ring belongs to Susan," I said.

Jennings sighed.

"Is that true, boys?" he asked.

"Things'll go better from here on in if you don't lie."

"I guess," said Donny.

Willie looked at his brother.

"You fuck," he muttered.

Jennings lifted Ruth's hand and looked at the ring.

"Okay," he said and then all at once his voice was gentle.

"You go give it to her." He worked it off her finger.

"Tell her not to lose it," he said.

"I will."

I went upstairs.

All at once I felt very tired.

Susan lay on the couch.

I walked over to her and before she could ask what was going on I held it up for her. I saw her look at the ring and see what it was and then suddenly the look in her eyes brought me down to my knees beside her and she reached for me with her thin pale arms and I hugged her and we cried and cried.

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EPILOGUE

We were juveniles—not criminals but delinquents.

So that under the law we were innocent by definition, not to be held accountable for our acts exactly, as though everybody under eighteen were legally insane and unable to tell right from wrong. Our names were never released to the press. We had no criminal record and no publicity.

It struck me as pretty strange but then as we were excluded from the rights of adults I suppose it was the natural thing to exclude us from the responsibilities of adults as well.

Natural unless you were Meg or Susan.

Donny, Willie, Woofer, Eddie, Denise and I went to juvenile court and Susan and I testified. There was no prosecutor and no defense attorney, just the Honorable Judge Andrew Silver and a handful of psychologists and social workers earnestly discussing what to do with everybody. Even from the beginning what to do was obvious. Donny, Willie, Woofer, Eddie and Denise were placed in juvenile detention centers—reform school to us. Eddie and Denise for just two years since they hadn't any hand in the actual killing. Donny, Willie and Woofer until they turned eighteen, the stiffest sentence you could get in those days. At eighteen they were to be released and their records destroyed.

The child's acts could not be held against the man.

They found a foster home for Susan in another town, up in the lakes district, far away.

Because of what she'd said about me at the hearing and the fact that under juvenile law there was, strictly speaking, no such thing as an accomplice, I was remanded to the custody of my parents and assigned a psychiatric social worker, a bland schoolteacherly woman named Sally Beth Cantor who saw me once a week and then once a month for exactly a year and who always seemed concerned with my "progress" in "dealing with" what I'd seen and done—and not done—yet always seemed half asleep as well, as though she'd been through this a billion times before and wished against all reason and evidence that my

parents would be far more unforgiving with me or that I'd go at them with an ax or something, just to give her some issue or occurrence to sink her teeth into. Then the year was up and she just stopped coming. It was a full three months before I missed her.

I never saw any of them again. At least not in person.

I corresponded with Susan for a while. Her bones healed. She liked her foster parents. She had managed to make a few friends. Then she stopped writing. I didn't ask why. I didn't blame her.

My parents divorced. My father moved out of town. I saw him infrequently. I think he was embarrassed by me in the end. I didn't blame him, either.

I graduated school in the low middle third of my class, which was no surprise to anybody.

I went to college for six years, interrupted by two years in Canada to avoid the draft, and came out with a masters in business. This time I graduated third in my class. Which was a big surprise to everybody.

I got a job on Wall Street, married a woman I'd met in Victoria, divorced, married again, and divorced again a year later.

My father died of cancer in 1982. My mother had a heart attack in '85 and died on the kitchen floor by her sink, clutching at a head of broccoli. Even at the end, alone and with no one to cook for, she'd kept the habit of eating well.

You never knew when the Depression would be back again.

I came home with Elizabeth, my fiancée, to sell my mother's house and settle her estate and together we poured through the cluttered relics of her forty years of living there. I found uncashed checks in an Agatha Christie novel. I found letters I'd written from college and crayon drawings I'd made in the first grade. I found newspaper items brown with age about my father opening the Eagle's Nest and getting this or that award from the Kiwanis or the VFW or the Rotary.

And I found clippings on the deaths of Megan Loughlin and Ruth Chandler.

Obituaries from the local paper.

Meg's was short, almost painfully short, as though the life she'd lived hardly qualified as a life at all.

LOUGH LING - Megan, 14, Daughter of the late Daniel Loughlin and the late Joanne Haley Loughlin. Sister of Susan Loughlin. Services will be held at Fisher Funeral Home, 110 * Oakdale Avenue, Farmdale, NJ, Saturday, 1:30 p.m.

Ruth's was longer:

CHANDLER Ruth, 37, Wife of William James Chandler, Daughter of the late Andrew Perkins and the late Barbara Bryan Perkins. She is survived by her husband and her sons William Jr., Donald, and Ralph. Services will be held at Hopkins Funeral Home, 15 Valley Road, Farmdale, NJ, Saturday 2:00 p.m.

It was longer but just as empty.

I looked at the clippings and realized that their services had been just half an hour apart that day, held in funeral homes about six or seven blocks from each other. I had gone to neither. I couldn't imagine who had.

I stared out the living-room window at the house across the driveway. My mother had said a young couple lived there now. Nice people, she said. Childless but hoping. They were putting in a patio as soon as they had the money.

The next clipping down was a photo. A picture of a young, good-looking man with short brown hair and wideeyed goofy smile.

It looked familiar.

I unfolded it.

It was an item from the Newark Star-Ledger, dated January 5, 1978. The headline read "Manasquan Man Indicted For Murder" and the story told how the man in the picture had been arrested December 25th along with an unidentified juvenile in connection with the stabbing and burning deaths of two teenage girls, Patricia Highsmith, 17, of Manasquan, and Debra Cohen, also 17, of Asbury Park.

Both victims exhibited signs of sexual assault and though both had been stabbed repeatedly the cause of death was burning. They'd been doused with gas and torched in an abandoned field.

The man in the photo was Woofer.

My mother had never told me. I looked at the photo and thought I could see at least one good reason why—I might have looked in the paper and seen the picture.

In his twenties Woofer had come to look so much like Ruth it was frightening.

Like all the other clippings this one had been stuffed in a shirt box and put on the attic stairs and the edges were dry and brown and crumbling. But I noticed something along the margin. I turned it and recognized my mother's writing.

She'd written in pencil, which had faded, but it was readable.

Just beside the headline and rising up along the side of the picture she'd written with fine irony I wonder how Donny and Willie are doing. And now, on the uncertain, unsettled eve of my third marriage, to a woman who would have been exactly Meg's age had she lived, plagued with nightmares all of which seem to concern failing again, failing somebody, carelessly leaving them to the rough mercies of the world—and adding to those names she'd scrawled along the side of the clipping the names of Denise and Eddie Crocker, and my own name, I wonder too.

JACK KETCHUM

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. In the center, a campfire burns brightly. A human skull is impaled on a stick and hangs over the fire. To the left, a large, bloody axe lies on the ground. To the right, a wire cage is visible, containing several more human skulls. The overall color palette is dominated by reds, oranges, and blacks, creating a sense of horror and violence.

AUTHOR OF *OFF SEASON* AND *THE GIRL NEXT DOOR*

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PEACEABLE KINGDOM RED

THE LOST

JACK
KETCHUM
OFFSPRING



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“When I awoke the dire wolf Six hundred pounds of sin Was
grinning at my window All I said was come on in.”

—The Grateful Dead

PART I

MAY 12, 1992

12:25 A.M.

She stood dappled in grime and moonlight beneath the drifting branches of the shade tree and watched through the window. Behind her the others jittered.

She touched the screen with her fingertips. It was loose. Old. She rubbed her thumb and forefinger together, felt the fine grit of rust.

She concentrated on the girl inside. The acid-flower scent of her, riding high and strong over the musty-smelling couch on which she lay—even above the warm, grease-soaked kernels of grain in the bowl beside her.

The girl smelled of musk. Of urine and wildflowers.

The girl had breasts and long, dark hair.

Older than she was.

Her clothes were tight.

They would hinder.

The males pressed close, anxious to see. She let them.

It was important that they know what lay inside,

though she would guide them when the time came. The males were younger and needed guidance.

But this was new to them, and thrilling. The lash of thin birch sticks across their bodies. For balance they would have to look carefully now.

She felt the diamond brush her chest, its cool gold setting, swaying from the dirty knotted twine.

The night was still. Crickets calling in the hollow.

They watched the girl lost and deaf to them in the bright splash of voices out of the flickering light. And each, for a moment, as though brushed with the wind of one sudden mind, felt the baby asleep and alone above them in the thirsty dark—their dark, the dark of their elders, of the Woman and First Stolen.

They imagined they could see the child, smell the child.

They only had to watch.

A single cloud had only to pass before the moon.

1:46 A.M.

Dammit, Nancy!

Every light in the house was on again. Downstairs, anyway.

She turned the Buick wagon up into the drive.

Girl must think I'm made of money, she thought. I bet the stereo's on and the TV too and there's no Coke left in the refrigerator.

She was just a little drunk.

Her right rear wheel slid over the row of rocks and gravel and crushed three of the remaining tulips trying to survive at the edge of the lawn. *To hell with 'em*, she thought.

She'd crushed them sober too, half as often as not.

She cut the motor. Switched off the lights.

She sat there a moment thinking about Dean across the bar, ignoring her, drinking his Wild Turkey, her goddamn *husband* for god's sake looking right through her as though she were a ghost.

But that was Dean. Either you got nothing or else you got a whole lot more than you'd ever want to bargain for.

The nothing was better.

It was humiliating, though. And typical. Whether you lived with him or without him he was Mr. Humiliation. He got his kicks that way.

She took a deep breath to shake off the anger and opened the car door, reached for her old black purse with the .32 revolver in the zippered side pocket that she kept there just in case he tried to beat the shit out of her again like he had in the Caribou lot last Friday night, pushed away from the wheel, and got out. It was harder than it should have been. She'd never lost the weight after the baby. She guessed the beers didn't help any. The purse felt heavy on her arm.

Fucking Dean.

She slammed the car door. It didn't shut right on the driver's side. *I got to fix that*, she thought.

With what?

With Dean gone there was hardly enough money to feed her and the baby. That and pay the sitter one

night a week. With the housework and the job, that one night a week—a movie and a couple of drinks, maybe—was a necessity now that the baby was finally old enough to be left for a while. But a barmaid made next to nothing in Dead River, and nobody tipped worth a shit. Whatever you had to say about the tourists, they tipped at least.

One more month, she thought, till tourist season. You just got to hang in there.

She stepped across the cracked macadam to the side door, sorting through her key ring for the house key.

She heard something thump through the open kitchen window. A Coke bottle, probably, against the too-expensive butcher-block table. Nancy eating and drinking her out of house and home again.

I guess I could cut down on the beers, she thought. I could do that. Save a little money that way. I mean, what's important, anyway?

Me and the baby, right?

She felt a flush of guilt.

Why did she always call her the baby?

Her name was Suzannah. Suzi. It wasn't always

the baby. She remembered a time when she'd crooned the name. Now she hardly used it. It was as though the baby were just some sort of *thing*, another something in the way like the mortgage on the house and repairs on the roof or the faucet leaking down in the cellar.

She guessed Dean had screwed the pooch on that for her too. Like everything else.

For a moment she could almost cry.

She walked up the stairs and fit the key in the lock. God *dammit*, Nancy!

She didn't need the key. The door was open.

She'd told the girl again and again—*keep it locked*.

Okay—so Dean was at the bar tonight. But he wasn't *always* going to be. He was going to drop by one of these nights when she wasn't home, when her car wasn't there in the driveway. And twice already he'd threatened to clean her out. Pull up in Walchinski's truck and haul away everything but the dirty laundry.

I wouldn't put it past him, she thought.

I got to talk to this girl.

“Nancy?”

She opened the door to the dayroom where the television was on without the sound—whatever goddamn good *that* was—and closed the door behind her and locked it. She kept on walking toward the kitchen. And the first thing she saw was the puddle on the linoleum floor seeping around the corner into the good hardwood floor of the dayroom—Coke, she guessed, coffee, something dark and flowing and *jesus!* she was going to *murder* this girl—and stepping carefully to avoid it, she looked up and at the same time smelled the stink and suddenly what she was going to say froze inside her and so did the scream, so she could only stand there a moment trying to wrench it all into her at once like a single labored breath in a gale-force wind.

Two of them perched on the counter by the sink. Squatting, staring at her, eyes unnaturally bright. Their dangling arms covered with blood.

Children.

While Nancy lay naked on the butcher-block table.
Her body motionless. Pale.
Her arms already gone.

Her clothes lay scattered across the room. Her jeans beside the table—wet, brown and gleaming.

The cabinets were open, boxes and jars broken. Flour, bread crumbs, crackers, sugar, jams and jellies spilled across the counter to the floor.

Her arms were drying in the sink. Along with the dishes.

All this she saw in a moment, saw too that they were ready for her while her stomach boiled and the girl with the bloody hatchet and the two identical, filthy boys who had been holding Nancy's legs apart turned to her all serious and businesslike and not at all like the younger two squatting grinning on the counter.

She looked at the girl and, empty eyed, the girl looked back, and each seemed to recognize the other and what her presence meant here—and for a moment the object of their thoughts was the same, simultaneous, though the thoughts themselves were as different as blood and stone. The girl's thoughts cold, formal, almost ritualistic, an assertion of power, concerned that this woman should know everything that had happened here. Hers so suddenly urgent

and up from so wrenchingly deep inside her that when her daughter's name swelled across her lips
(*"Suzannah!"*)

she knew Dean had done nothing to change what lay between mother and daughter, it was only a kind of exhaustion of her hopes, temporary, and that given time it would have passed. And knowing this, and knowing that there was no time, she felt her heart break then and there. So that when the smallest boy, the one she hadn't seen before, stepped out from behind the table with the white plastic trash bag pulled tight over the small, still, familiar form inside and held it up to her for her to see, she was already tearing at her purse for the revolver so she could blast them back to whatever hell they came from—and would have—had not the hatchet fallen in its fine arc to the center of her forehead and brought her instantly shuddering to her knees.

Blind to heartbreak forever.

3:36 A.M.

George Peters dreamed that Mary, his wife—dead three years now—had given birth to a son.

Their son was two years old and playing on the floor.

There were wooden blocks all around him and toy trains ran on a track that began beneath the Christmas tree and disappeared down the hall into the Peters' bedroom, returning, somehow, right through the living room window.

Peters was sitting in an armchair reading the paper. It was a bright sunny day in May or June but the Christmas tree was there and the trains ran round and round.

Mary was out visiting. Peters was minding the boy.

Then someone was knocking on the door, urgent. Calling his name.

He got up and it was Sam Shearing, dead *eleven* years now, telling him he had to get the hell out of there, he had to get out of there *now*, he had to grab the boy and run because the train was coming.

Peters told him he knew the train was coming. The train went round and round.

You don't understand! said Shearing. *You don't fucking understand!* And he started to run. Which wasn't like Sam Shearing at all.

Peters blinked and Sam was gone. He closed the door and went back to the living room where the boy was playing, banging his blocks together.

Which was when he heard the train.

Rumbling, barreling toward the house.

Peters snatched up his son. He ran past the tree into the kitchen—a younger Peters, *fast*—while the engine smashed through the living room window and burst across the room, coming at them faster than any man could run, the boy hysterical in his arms and the huge black head of the thing ramming past refrigerator and dishwasher . . .

Bearing down . . .

He woke and it was as though he *had* been running, his ticker was beating so fast. He was sweating. The sheets were wet and smelled of old, stale scotch.

At least there was no headache. He'd

remembered the aspirin, for a change. But sitting up his brain felt foggy. He guessed the booze was still working in him.

He looked at the clock. It wasn't even four in the morning. He'd never get back to sleep now.

And sleep was what the scotch was supposed to be about in the first place.

Mary wouldn't have approved, but she would have understood. There was only so much thinking and so much loneliness you were supposed to be asked to handle. Since she died it wasn't just the nightmares that got to him, that made him want to start drinking at four in the afternoon and keep on drinking right on into the night, it was the simple fact of living in the house without her.

Retirement with your best and oldest friend was one thing. Retirement *period* was another.

He heard the knocking again. But it wasn't in the dream this time, it was at his door. And he guessed the other had been that, too. *Insistent*.

"I'm coming! Hold your horses!"

He got up from the bed. A naked old man with a belly.

He went to the dresser for his shorts and to the closet for his pants. Whoever it was had heard him, because the knocking stopped.

But who the hell was coming after him at a quarter to four in the morning? Friends, drinking buddies—they were few and far between now. Half of them dead, half just moved away.

Dead River was almost all strangers these days.

And there he was again. Feeling sorry for himself.

Whiner, he thought.

He had a brother in Sarasota who kept telling him about the good life down there. He and his wife lived in a mobile-home park with a windmill out in front about a mile from Siesta Key. He'd visited once and one thing was sure, they weren't lonely. People dropped by day and night. There was a lot of walking and bike riding going on, people with heart conditions or circulatory conditions or whatever out getting some exercise, and folks would see his brother and sister-in-law sitting in the shade of the screened-in porch and come on in for a beer.

They went to dances, played golf, went out to restaurants and clubhouses, ran social affairs and

potluck dinners.

It wasn't for him.

There was the heat for one thing.

He was a man who liked his seasons. The bare trees in January and the green in May. Even the winter, the way the cold could take your breath away mornings, the shoveling that steamed you up inside your clothes and the wood fires in the grate.

What you had in Florida was just heat. Heat that was fine and pleasant about a third of the time, a little uncomfortable about a third of the time, and a third of the time like walking through steam. Like walking through clouds of your own sweat.

The second thing was that he'd never been that social.

There were times he'd thought it would be good to meet another woman. You could do that down there. Nobody ever seemed to stay single all that long in his brother's park. But you had to go to the dinners and dances to do that, you had to have a certain spirit for the thing.

While he didn't even have the spirit to answer this goddamn door here.

He put on a robe and pair of slippers and shuffled over. He'd forgotten to turn on the porch light again so he flicked it on now and opened the door.

"Vic."

Vic Manetti was standing in the yellow light. There was a trooper leaning on the squad car behind him but at that distance Peters couldn't make out who he was.

Manetti was "the new guy." Sheriff of Dead River for well over two years now but still "the new guy" to most people because he came from New York City and wasn't local.

"Sorry to wake you, George."

"That's all right."

Peters respected him. He'd pushed a few back with Manetti in the Caribou from time to time—and talking about what went on in town these days, sort of keeping in touch, Peters had the impression that he was a pretty good cop. He was calm, he had brains and he was thorough. You couldn't ask much more in a sawdust-and-cinders little burg like this.

But now, standing there, Peters thought he'd never seen the man so uncomfortable.

"I need to talk to you, George," he said.

"I guess you do. You want to come inside?"

"Actually I was hoping you'd be willing to come with us."

He watched the man shift around inside himself looking for the right thing to say. Then he guessed he found it.

"I need you to look at something for me. I need your expertise on something."

"Expertise?" He had to smile. It wasn't a word you heard much in Dead River.

"I got to warn you. It's ugly."

And Peters had a feeling then—maybe it was the word *expertise* clicking in—but some kind of light went off in his brain telling him that he knew what Manetti was talking about.

He managed to hope he was wrong.

"Give me a minute."

He walked back inside and took off the robe and slippers, found a shirt in the drawer neatly folded—neatness, even with the drinking, being something he knew Mary would have wanted him to hold on to—and a pair of shoes by the bed. He went to the

kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of orange juice and gulped a couple of swallows. Then he went into the bathroom and splashed some water on his face and brushed his teeth. The face in the mirror looked all its sixty-six years and then some.

He walked back to the bedroom and took his wallet off the dresser. Her photo stood there smiling at him, an aging woman but still handsome. Way before the cancer.

Out of habit, distracted by the sight of her picture the way he guessed he almost always was, he opened the top drawer and had the .38 and its holster halfway out before he realized he wasn't going to need it this time.

He could leave the guns to the youngsters.

Vic was in the squad car waiting for him. The trooper he couldn't make out before turned out to be Miles Harrison. He'd known Miles since he was just a kid. For a while he'd been their paperboy. For some reason he could never quite hit the porch. They'd cursed him every winter.

He said hello, asked after Miles' mom and dad,

who were fine, thanks, and got in back. They started up. And then he was looking at the backs of their heads through the plate-glass-and-wire-mesh screen.

A funny place, he thought, for an old ex-sheriff to be riding.

Half an hour later the scotch was trying to slide up out of him and he was remembering his breathing, trying to keep it the hell down.

The kitchen was a goddamn slaughterhouse.

He stood there looking at what was left of the woman and the sitter and he knew right away what he had here. He'd known since seeing the urine sprayed across the stairs outside . . . that someone had *marked* the place.

And so, he guessed, did Manetti.

"You see why I wanted you," he said.

Peters nodded.

"The babysitter's mother called it in. Her name's Nancy Ann David, by the way, sixteen years old last March. The mother said it was getting late so she started phoning, but nobody answered. She tried

some more until it got her worried and then she called us.”

“The woman?”

He looked down at the body on the floor. Like the sitter on the table it was naked and both its arms and legs were gone. There was a hole cut in the chest that somebody had pulled wide apart, breaking up the rib cage, and there was nothing in there where the heart was supposed to be. The skull was split and the brains were gone. Intestines trailed across the linoleum floor.

“Her name is Loreen Ellen Kaltsas. Thirty-six years old. Separated. Husband’s name is Dean Allan Kaltsas. We’ve got him in custody and I talked to him down at the station. Evidently they didn’t much care for each other. And he admits to smacking her around. But I don’t think there’s any connection. He seems pretty damn worried about the baby.”

“The baby’s how old, did you say?”

“Eighteen months. No sign of her anywhere. No blood on the crib, none in her room. Nothing.”

He stepped around the blood and urine to the girl on the table. Max Joseph, the county coroner, was

working on her.

“George.”

“Hello, Max.”

“How do you like this? Here we go again, huh?”

“Christ, Max, I hope not.”

He made himself look at her. On this one most of the left breast was gone too, sliced away.

“Well I’ll tell you, the reason I think we’ve got another go-round, George, is what’s *not* here. All the meaty bits, if you catch my drift. Familiar?”

He didn’t answer.

“Cause of death?”

“Hell, George, they ripped her heart out.”

He looked down at the open blue eyes. Nancy Ann David had been pretty once. Not what anyone would call a beauty, but pretty. He’d bet there were boyfriends out there. People who’d miss her.

“What about the woman?”

“Blow to the head. Probably an ax or a hatchet. Died instantly.”

He walked back through the kitchen. Manetti was waiting in the dayroom. Together they walked

outside. He needed some air.

Vic offered him a cigarette. He took it and they lit up. The sky was starting to brighten now, it had that nice early-morning glow, and you could hear the birds starting to replace the crickets.

“What do you think?” asked Manetti.

He heard the subtext. *You're the only one left who's been there. You're the only one who'd know for sure.*

Everyone else had either died that night or had moved away—to someplace they wouldn't have to think and remember so much every time they walked out into the woods or went for a swim by the shoreline.

He ought to have done the same.

But for Mary maybe he would have, but Mary had been born in Dead River and wanted to stay.

Still the nightmares should have been enough to tell him. *Go. Get out of here.* The nightmares and all that came to him unbidden practically every day until he lifted that second or third glass of scotch. Mostly the boy, naked, drifting toward him through his sights and Peters telling him to stop but him not stopping

and the shotguns roaring, all opening up at once and
...

And Mary was dead now. He had no family.

The town was strangers.

He should have gone.

He could still go.

Fuck the heat in Sarasota. They had air-conditioning, didn't they?

"Some kind of copycat, do you think?" Manetti's voice was trying to sound hopeful.

Peters looked at him. He looked tired, his thin, wiry body starting to curve into one big question mark. Manetti wasn't so young anymore either.

"After eleven years, Vic? A copycat? After eleven years go by?"

He threw down the cigarette. The stink of flesh and blood was still there in his nostrils. The cigarette couldn't compete.

That and the other stink.

The one he remembered like a stab wound somewhere that had never healed—that would probably never heal.

The woman, bleeding, hurling herself down the cliffside, her knife slashing Daniels ear to ear. . . .

“What I think,” he said.

He stepped on the cigarette guttering in the grass and looked out across the hills, gray but visible now, leading down through the forest to the cliffs and to the sea. Not so far away.

He listened for the birds. A good clean morning sound, dependable and real as daylight. The bird sounds helped.

“What I think,” he said, “is that we missed some last time. And I think they’ve been away for a little while.”

4:47 A.M.

By the time David Halbard looked up from his Mac it was dawn. *Enough*, he thought, though he felt no strain.

He pushed away from his desk in the leather swivel chair, released the floppy disks from their disk drives, and filed them.

The night had gone by fast and well. Ever since college he'd been able to do this—pull all-nighters—if there was sufficient challenge to the project.

College was thirteen years ago. He had the thinning hair to prove it. But his energy hadn't diminished. Just keep the coffee coming and he was fine.

David Halbard was a satisfied man. He was right now. Sipping the dregs of his tired fifth cup.

He was always a bit surprised to find himself feeling that way. His first year out of the University of Pennsylvania via Brooklyn Polytechnic had been a disaster after all. Engineering school had prepared him for the big design work, but the job at Comcorp

had turned out to be completely by the book, nothing even remotely sexy. He gave it a year and a half and then quit, trusting to luck.

The job at IBM was better—a big new machine for the U.S. Coast Guard. He and two other guys had done most of the work themselves and they'd had a terrific time. But halfway through, the Guard had scrapped the project. Too complex, they said.

It wasn't too complex as far as the team was concerned. It was just that the Guard was so fucking simple.

The next three years saw two more designs come and go, and by 1986 he'd had it. Total burnout, total discouragement. At this rate he was going to wind up designing transformers somewhere or something equally boring, plugging away all day and hating himself, and hating Amy for putting up with him.

By then he'd married her, his former assistant at IBM—similarly, her job was way beneath her—the single grace note in his messy, discordant life. They decided to simplify, to pick a place they liked and find some way to make it work. They had a little savings. They'd repair TVs and radios if they had to.

They were young and smart and what the hell.

The place was easy to come by. Amy came from Portland originally and still thought of Maine as home. And David, Brooklyn born, thought the coast of Maine looked fine.

He still did.

He turned off the Mac, got out of his chair and walked to the double plate-glass doors to the sun deck. He slid one open to let in the morning air.

There was a breeze ruffling the tall grass and goldenrod beyond the stand of oaks but the day was going to be mild.

Small birds fluttered through the branches, assembling, singing in the trees.

One more cup, he thought, out here on the deck.

He walked through the study back to the kitchen and poured himself a mugful.

Coffee never kept him awake. Work did.

Work was supposed to.

He took the mug outside and sat in one of the green wooden lawn chairs along the weathered railing.

Over his head two thick branches swayed in the breeze. The largest branch reached all the way across the deck, nearly fingering the bedroom window adjacent to the study.

Amy lay sleeping inside.

Got to cut that back one of these days, he thought.

But he didn't like to touch them, really. There were ten trees, spaced unevenly, all black oak, tall and old and venerable, and they seemed to deserve their living space.

It was unusual for trees to grow as big as these this far north. The cold winter winds off the sea kept most things stunted, hunched low to the ground. Humbled.

He wiggled his toes and sipped his coffee.

He was barefoot. The sun had warmed the deck already.

The deck was painted pinewood, gray, and it was roomy, twelve by thirty-five, room enough for four comfortable chairs, a picnic table with benches and a grill. Stilts pegged it to the side of a steep hill that rolled down through the stand of oak and scrub and

flattened out to over three full acres of grasslands, another two acres of low pine, fir and cedar, and beyond that, to the point—to the cliffs and the sea.

You couldn't see the cliffs through the pines. But the view was still spectacular in its way. Nothing trimmed. Nothing mowed or planted. Everything wild.

The woods are dark, he thought.

Thank god for that.

It was the game that had bought them the place.

Two years before, while he was still writing code into ROM and then debugging, while Amy was designing the graphics and Phil was composing the music back in New York, they'd rented. A hundred-year-old house back in the woods. Charming except when it rained, because then the roof leaked in about a dozen places. You had a symphony of pots and pans. And nothing left to cook with at all.

But his idea for a fast, tense, really *scary* horror-adventure game turned out to be right on the money. Computer Arts had snapped it up, licensing American rights at a royalty rate that struck him as surprisingly generous. And "The Woods Are Dark" became their first big win against Nintendo. In fact it

was *anybody's* first big win against Nintendo—they'd dominated the market for so long.

Part of the reason was the controversy. His design had included hordes of spiders coming to devour you through trembling sticky webs, writhing snake pits, deformed half-human monsters popping out of trees, from behind bushes, and a graveyard where the dead hauled themselves slowly, painfully, hand over hand out of their graves. What you killed, bled. Bled plenty.

Amy's graphics were state of the art and shivery as hell and people were offended that it was mostly kids who would be playing with this thing.

But neither David nor Computer Arts saw it that way. Compared to a PG-rated movie these days the game was innocent as Scrabble.

Compared to every other game it was a stick of dynamite.

So sales went through the roof, allowing the company to buy more games, all of which were selling, too.

But "The Woods Are Dark" was Computer Arts' equivalent to Nintendo's "Super Mario Brothers." No

other game had topped it either here or in Japan—it was raking in as much over there now as it was at home. And the advance for the new game, “Hide and Seek,” was stunning.

So he and Amy went house shopping.

What they found was this, a gray cedar-shake saltbox with a view—also about a hundred years old and as isolated as the rental had been, with their nearest neighbor almost two miles north, but light-years from the other house in terms of upkeep. It had been owned by an old country doctor and his wife until he died and she moved to Arizona to be with her children. They’d had enough money and stubborn Yankee respect for things past to keep the house pretty much what it had been originally, to keep the hand-hewn beams exposed and the moldings stained, not painted, and to hold on to the old potbellied stove.

Next week Campbell and his crew were bolting the sills to the foundation for the new addition. Much of the lumber was already piled under the deck, covered by tarps. He’d seen Campbell’s work and knew the man to be a meticulous craftsman, one

who could be counted upon to keep the feel of the place and blend the old skillfully with the new. He was expensive but well worth the price.

And hell, they had the money. Miraculously, they had a lot more money than either of them knew what to do with.

His brokers knew.

Nintendo had one thing right, he thought. Roughly translated from the Japanese, the word *nintendo* meant, “no matter how hard you work, the results are in the hands of god.”

He figured that said it all.

The coffee was almost gone.

The sun was warming. He was starting to feel drowsy. He heard the sudden whir of wings and saw a bird beat hard out of the tall grass. Grouse, partridge, pheasant—some kind of game bird—he wished he knew more about these things. The bird flew a hundred yards or so and settled back into the grass again. He watched until it disappeared.

Then looked back to where it had come from.

And damn near dropped his coffee.

It was far away but his eyes were pretty good, and

even if they'd only been half as good there was no mistaking what was out there.

She was standing in the grass and goldenrod. The grass was maybe three feet high, just up to her waist. If he had to guess, he'd say she was seventeen or eighteen. A teenager.

He couldn't make out her features but her hair was dark and long, very long. Covering her naked shoulders. Half hiding her breasts.

He couldn't say about the rest of her, but from the waist on up she was naked.

Holding a flower and turning it in her hands. A red one.

She was looking in his direction.

At the house, or at him.

Amy's not going to believe this, he thought. Our very own wood sprite out here in the yard.

The girl stood a moment longer and then turned and walked toward the pines, a wild thick cascade of dark brown hair disappearing slowly through the bright yellow grass.

He had to wake Amy and tell her.

He walked back into the study and slid the door

closed behind him. He was on his way to their bedroom, passing the old Defiant potbellied stove in the middle of the study when he glanced at the clock.

Five-thirty.

She'll kill me, he thought.

With good reason. Amy hadn't been sleeping well in the past three months since Melissa was born, though Melissa was evolving (with incredible rapidity, he thought—it was amazing how swiftly infants changed) into a good easy baby who didn't tend to wake them every half hour like some of the others he'd known. He'd only had to tend to her once tonight.

And Amy'd slept through it soundly for a change.

Let her go, he thought. The news could keep.

He peeked in on his way to the bathroom.

Her body had come back fast and he was pleased to see her sleeping naked again, the strong back, the slope of shoulder and the curve of her breast pressed into the bedsheet.

On the other side of the room Melissa lay tiny and pink faced in her bassinet.

You're a pretty lucky sonovabitch, he thought.

You knowthat?

Home and wife and baby.

Wood nymph and all.

Out in the field he heard the first crow of the morning.

5:02 A.M.

Second Stolen moved through the shadows of the pine and cedar forest, breathing deeply of its sweet smell. Beneath her feet the fallen needles were thick, cool, wet with dew. A low branch brushed her thigh and made her nipples stiffen.

Sensation entered her more deeply than it did the others. She was not exactly pleased by this, but she knew it to be true.

She was nearing the edge of the forest. Already she could hear the sea.

She had not yet found the children. But it was dawn now. She had to return.

The Woman would be angry.

The Woman had sensed something. The Woman had sent Second Stolen to find the children—and she had not.

She felt a sullen shame.

She was not the hunter the Woman wished her to be.

At the end she had drifted to the house where the

infant was, thinking dimly of her own child, who was hardly any older. But it was early and the infant had not appeared yet. Only the man, who had seen her.

She wondered if it mattered that the man had seen her.

There was only one way to cool the Woman's anger, and that was to anticipate it. As she walked she watched for the proper instrument.

It needed to be thin and strong and supple.

There.

The branch was green, tough, but her hands were calloused hard and she twisted it to the right, down and then up, splitting through the filaments of sapwood. She peeled away the needles. The wood bled in her hand.

She walked to the clearing, squinting at the sun.

Fat black bumblebees drifted through the hawkweed, daisies, and clover. She stood among them, knowing the bees were harmless unless you hit or stepped on one. The bees flew low around her, gathering pollen on their long black legs.

Apart from the bees she was alone.

Across the clearing the surf pounded.

She brought the branch down across her back, striking hard, knowing that each blow must mark her or else there was no sense to it. She used it across her buttocks and thighs but did not dare to strike lower than that. She did not wish to stir the bees.

Sensation entered her more deeply than it did the others.

When she was finished her hand was black with bark and sap.

Beyond the field the woods grew thick again. The path twisted up and then down through a long shaded canopy of gnarled scrubby pitch pine and spruces, beaten low by the offshore winds.

She walked through them to the cliffs, found the path again and started down.

Halfway down she saw them, all six of them below her scrambling over the rocks at the shoreline. The Girl carried a bag. The others did not go empty handed either though it was too far away to see what they had gathered.

It was dawn and they were moving quickly, silently. They would be there long before her.

The Woman would be angry.

She could call to them. Make them wait. The Woman might not question her, might think she had found them after all. Though it had taken her nearly all night and into the morning.

Except that she was marked already.

She was naked, and the Woman would read the marks and know.

On the trail before her lay a fox scat. She used the stick to pick it apart and saw the matted hair and bone—the fox's meal of mouse or rabbit.

Its prey had known pain before it died. Had struggled against it.

She sighed at what could not be helped and continued on alone.

7:20 A.M.

The map was out.

It wasn't the same map they'd used eleven years ago but it might as well have been—it was that crinkled up and beat to hell—and it hung against the same old smoke-stained slate gray station-house wall.

The last time Peters had seen the place was at his retirement party.

Mary had been there, looking pretty and openly relieved that he was finally getting out. A few of the other wives were there, those who knew him well and still cared to know him, and when they presented him with the pair of welded, four-inch-thick solid brass balls, some of the wives had blushed.

The time before that was the time he'd made his last arrest.

He was clearing out his desk when this skinny little weasel of a kid walks in to post his buddy's bail. The buddy'd been picked up for drunken driving and reckless endangerment and he'd been there two,

three days or so. They'd set bail at \$1,200.

So this kid is fishing through his pockets for the money, sort of fumbling around in there. He's nervous and Peters is watching him, wondering why. And then he sees why, because when the kid pulls out the cash, out pops a plastic baggie. The kid makes a grab for it but it falls to the floor.

Peters walks over and picks it up.

What's this? he says to the kid.

There's about a half an ounce of Thai stick there.

Aw hell, says the kid. Ah dammit. Ah shit.

Peters read him his rights right then and there. And as soon as they had him in the holding cell Peters accepted the bail money for his friend. Gave him a receipt for the amount. Unfortunately \$1,200 was all the kid had on him. So that once that was gone he couldn't make the measly \$150 for his own bail. Peters had often wondered how long the buddy'd let him stew there.

He'd meant to ask Manetti but he kept forgetting.

Manetti and Miles Harrison were listening now. Peters was pointing at the map.

"We didn't know what we had eleven years ago,"

he said. "Or where to find it. This time I think you can assume we do. Let's say they roam afield a bit, which means they could be anywhere along the coast from here to Lubec and maybe down to Cutler. There's plenty of forest all through this area and we can't afford to rule that out but I'd bet on the actual shoreline, on one of the caves in here. That's where we found them last time.

"It's still a hell of a job. This whole damn area's honeycombed with caves. But last time it was night already when we got started. One in the morning. We couldn't help that. But here we got some daylight hours to use so I suggest you move as fast as you can. Call in everybody you've got including the State Highway boys and do it *yesterday*."

Manetti looked at Harrison. The younger man didn't need to be told.

"I'll handle it," he said. He walked over to the next cubicle and they could hear him on the phone in there.

Manetti was looking at the map. Worried. Running his hand over his face and through his curly hair.

"You know what I don't get?" he said. "Where the

hell could they have *been* so long? How come nobody's seen them? I mean, you do this kind of thing, you get noticed. So where've they been hiding?"

It was seven in the morning but Peters could still have used a drink. Time was as fluid as the booze was. It all depended on what was going on inside.

"I'll tell you, Vic," he said, "I thought about that. I don't think they *were* hiding. I think that what they were doing was moving."

"Moving?"

"Look. We're a spit in the eye from Canada here. Plenty of coastline all along the gulf, all the way up to Newfoundland. Maybe even up into Hudson Bay. Plenty of places to wander. Some of it practically deserted. We don't tend to coordinate missing persons stats too terrifically with Canada, at least I know we didn't in my day. And I assume that hasn't changed. But I bet if we asked they've had some funny ones over the years along that coast."

"We'll check it out," Manetti said.

"When we're finished here," said Peters. "When we've got 'em. When it's just mop-up."

He reflected that he'd been saying we again all morning. He hoped it wasn't getting in Manetti's way that he seemed to be finding himself playing top cop again.

Then again, if it was, there wasn't a whole lot he could do about it except try to watch his language. They'd asked him in. So there he was.

"You know what?" he said. "I bet they don't even know they crossed a border. I bet it never even occurred to them. I bet they just kept moving."

Unless you were looking at maps, he thought, borders were fluid too.

Manetti nodded.

"So where do you want to start?" he said.

And for a moment Peters saw Caggiano again—his neck torn open, trying to scream. Manetti looked a little like him, actually. Wiry.

He dumped the memory.

"We find that cave," he said. "We find the cave and hope they're calling it home again."

PART II

AFTERNOON

11:00 A.M.

Amy was just getting around to the breakfast dishes when she heard him turn on the shower in the bathroom. She wondered how much sleep he'd gotten and felt a familiar envy. David could get by on five or six hours a night, no problem. Whereas she needed eight and suffered when she didn't get them.

Which had been most of the time, since Melissa was born.

This third month, though, was easier. Melissa's patterns of sleeping, eating and alertness were becoming much more regular. She was sleeping as much as nine or ten hours a night now, waking only once or twice.

Her *own* sleeping patterns were the problem now. She hadn't yet adjusted. Last night had been her first really sound night's sleep in weeks.

It felt good. But it was hardly enough.

Whereas David liked to quote Warren Zevon—"I'll sleep when I'm dead."

She didn't know where he got his energy. Not from

his parents, that was for sure. His parents' idea of an evening had been three or four sitcoms, news at eleven, and bed.

It was one of the few things she didn't understand about him and it didn't amount to much. Otherwise, their minds worked similarly in most of the ways that counted. And they talked.

It was pretty much all you needed.

She stacked the last of the dishes in the dishwasher and dried her hands. Her skin was getting dry again and she made a mental note to cream them. Having no fingernails that were longer than a sixteenth of an inch was bad enough—Keyboard Nails Syndrome practically came with the territory—but she didn't need flaky skin as well.

Hormonally speaking there'd been a few changes since the delivery. On the upside, it had finally stabilized her wildly irregular period. On the downside, she couldn't even drink so much as a single glass of white wine anymore without risking losing her supper—though vodka sat fine for some reason.

That, and her hands got dry.

It wasn't too bad as trade-offs went.

Especially when you factored in Melissa.

She was napping and Amy was loath to wake her. But now that David was up she needed to get to the vacuuming. Claire and Luke were expected around two and she wanted to get in at least an hour's work on the design before they arrived.

So she supposed she'd have to risk it.

Nah, she thought. Get to work now. Let David do the vacuuming after he's had breakfast.

He won't mind. He never did.

Her PC was directly across the big oak desk from his. Sitting there together facing one another on those—nowadays—rare times that their schedules coincided they'd kid about feeling like the Fabulous Baker Boys, sans Michelle Pfeiffer. David sans hairpiece.

She poured a cup of coffee, dosed it with milk from the Coolerator, went to the desk and sat down.

She used her toe to switch on the power tap and pushed her disks into the disk drive. Then sat back ready to look at yesterday's work.

While it booted up she thought of Claire.

She should have been happy thinking about Claire, but the way things were these days the first feeling that came was anger. Not at her—she and Claire had been best friends since college, and nothing had changed about that.

But at Steven, her husband.

She'd seen it from the first, almost ten years ago.

Unfortunately, Claire hadn't.

Something vaguely *sneaky* about him. A kind of spinelessness behind all the good humor and courtesy and all his supposed caring for Claire. He had the habit of indirection, of never quite looking at you when he was talking to you. Then you'd catch him staring at you when you'd been looking elsewhere.

The men all liked him. Even David. *Mister Regular Guy*. Always ready with a drink or a laugh.

Amy hadn't trusted him for a minute.

She'd told Claire as much, as gently but firmly as she could, as soon as she realized that they were heading for marriage.

But he'd been smart. The way these low-level sociopath types were often smart, she guessed.

He'd played it perfectly. He'd come on like a friend and nothing more for months before declaring himself a potential lover. Got her into the habit of being around him—after a while, pretty much constantly. Edging into her circle of friends. Nice and easy.

Claire was on the rebound at the time. She'd finally found the strength to dump the guy she'd been living with since college, a guy so jealous and possessive and so *inappropriate* in his jealousy it would have been comical had it not led to a series of raging arguments, which culminated in a drunken scene one night outside her apartment with the boy proclaiming loudly that she was no goddamn better than his mother. By then Claire was vulnerable to the soft approach. And Steven had it down pat.

We'll be friends first and foremost, he always seemed to say. *I respect you.*

Amy remembered it well, cloying and phony.

But coming off this other maniac it was perfect. The sex was good. And it was easy for Claire to mistake attentiveness for caring. To assume he actually *liked* her. Loved her.

Amy doubted that Steven had ever liked or loved anybody.

She often wondered when, and why, Steven had decided he wanted her. Claire was uncommonly pretty and maybe that was it, because Steven was headed for some high-powered New York law firm, everybody who knew him was aware of that, and Claire would look good on his arm, good to the partners and to the clients, and because she was modest and graceful, even good to their wives.

She'd warned her. Probably too often. But Claire hadn't bought her arguments—either then, about the marriage, or later, about the advisability of having children by him.

Luke.

Poor Luke.

With a forger for a father.

When she thought about that and thought about Claire these days she felt angry and sad and wished to god she had the power to hurt the bastard.

And lucky. She also felt lucky.

She could hear David running water in the sink. He always wasted water when he shaved but if that was

all the trouble you had with a guy—that and the fact that he could never remember to put the toilet seat down and dropped his goddamn ashes all over the place because he could never seem to find an ashtray when he needed one—you didn't have trouble at all. And you damn well knew it.

Her father, bless him, had told her she would meet a man like this one day and she had never believed him, perhaps because part of her thought her father *was* that man and she'd come across nobody even vaguely like him. Yet one day there he was. Sexy, thoughtful, a good partner and by now, a proven good companion. He shared the chores, the responsibilities with Melissa, diapered her, fed her, got up nights those first two difficult months . . . and clearly saw in Amy an equal both at work and in their marriage.

She had come to recognize a certain distance in him since his father had died of cancer three years ago. He had loved the lazy, sweet old man and he'd taken it hard. She knew he brooded on it occasionally. When she questioned him he'd only say he missed him. The words rang true. But she

wondered if, without him knowing it, his feelings also ran deeper.

He worked so long, so late and hard. As though racing some internal clock. Lately he'd talked about quitting smoking.

She wondered if he was starting to become afraid of death. If his father's dying had added some ambiguous, questionable rider to the document of his own mortality.

I'll sleep when I'm dead.

If so, he didn't seem aware of it.

And he certainly didn't look aware of anything remotely like that now, walking into the study in his washed-out red terry bathrobe and unlaced tennis sneakers. He looked alive and fresh and just a little ridiculous.

"Got a start on the third board last night," he said. He leaned over and kissed the top of her head, nuzzled her long curly red hair. She smelled soap and papaya shampoo.

She was grateful that he was a man who had no truck with aftershave.

"I know. I looked it over first thing this morning. You

got a lot done. Looks good.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Coffee?”

“On the stove.”

“Terrific.”

From the kitchen he said, “What time’s Claire coming?”

“Twoish.”

“Good. Gives me time to fix the cord on the table lamp. Shorted out on me last night, around two in the morning. I’ve got to reinsulate the wire. We’ve got electrician’s tape floating around here somewhere, don’t we?”

“There’s some in the basement, I think.”

He walked back into the study and looked over her shoulder at the monitor. Then he looked down at her breasts where the robe had fallen away.

“How are you making out?”

“I haven’t really started. I got to thinking about Claire.”

He nodded, sipped his coffee. They’d discussed it

all before. She didn't need to explain. She knew he felt pretty much the same. He was Claire's friend too.

"Listen," she said. "How'd you like to run the vacuum in about an hour? Let Melissa sleep till then. So that I can do some work here."

"No problem."

He walked to the glass double doors. The sun was bright outside. He opened them and a breeze ruffled the papers beside her.

"Jesus!" he said. "I almost forgot. An *amazing* thing this morning! Are we aware of some retro-hip latter-day commune out this way? Something on that order?"

She looked up from the monitor.

"Excuse me?"

"There was a girl out here this morning, way on out in the field. A little after dawn. Real long hair and naked as my mother bore me."

"A girl?"

"Yeah. Sixteen, seventeen maybe. She was pretty far away."

"Naked?"

"From the waist up, anyway. I couldn't see the rest."

"You're kidding."

"Unh-unh."

"Nice breasts?"

"As I said, she was pretty far away."

"Hmmm."

She got up from the monitor and walked over to him. She put her arms around his waist.

"You didn't invite her in?"

"Why should I? Who wants the wood nymph when you got the goddess?"

She laughed. "Pretty saggy goddess."

"Goddesses don't sag. They ripen. As do the wheat and the corn."

"Corn is just about right."

She kissed him. He smelled of soap and coffee. His mouth was smooth.

"I'm not going to get much work done, am I?" she said.

"Not at the moment. And I'm not going to get to insulate the wire."

“Let’s not wake Melissa.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not planning on running the Electrolux either.”

He opened her robe, pushed it off her shoulders and lowered her on top of him to the couch, and the sun was warm on her back as she drew him up inside her.

She remembered that the monitor was still on, her program running.

It was the last thought she had for a while that wasn’t strictly for the two of them.

11:50 A.M.

Peters stood in the mouth of the cave, sweating. It wasn't just the climb. It was nerves.

Behind him Manetti, Harrison, and the four state troopers were jittery too. You could see it in the beams of their flashlights scudding across the fire-blackened walls.

Even if you didn't know what happened here the place was unnerving.

He shouldered the shotgun, knowing already he wasn't going to be needing it, and stepped inside.

Remembering what it was like.

The man, Nicholas something, the name strangely lost to him now, wearing glasses that flew off his face as they opened fire, mistaking him for one of them despite the glasses, they were so damn scared, killing him after all he'd been through, after he and the woman on the floor, naked, bleeding, torn to hell but still alive, had done most of their killing for them. He remembered shooting the one with the knife.

And then he remembered the boy . . .

. . . who'd been their captive god only knew how long, walking toward them, his arms held out in front of him, walking in that slow dreamy glide, so filthy and caked with his own dried blood that it was easy to figure he was one of them too, and when Peters told him to stop and he didn't stop they were taking no chances by then and all six shotguns opened up at once, and whether Peters had killed him or somebody else had killed him Peters would never know.

That was eleven years ago and he was glad he'd stopped for the pint of Johnny Walker. He was glad he wasn't a cop anymore, that he could pull the pint out of his pocket and break the seal and unscrew it and tilt it back and drink deep. Like he was doing now.

The others were watching. Rookie troopers cradling newer shotguns, disapproving.

Fuck 'em.

He was glad he wasn't a cop for lots of reasons.
But especially the boy.

He needed not to think about the boy.

He drank again and pocketed the bottle and looked around.

It was gone now—the skins, the rags, the clothing. They'd taken it all to the beach, right down to the last broken ax handle, the last gun stock, rake and leather belt, and burned it two days later. What didn't burn and what they didn't need to bag for identification they took to the old town dump on Tucker Road where most of it had come from in the first place.

Now all he saw here were a few bent nails and a tarnished doorknob on the hard dirt floor and that was that.

They hadn't been back. Not to this place.

Who knew? Maybe they had memories too.

"Shit," said Manetti.

They were all, in their way, disappointed. Relieved, sure. But disappointed. It had been so easy for him to find this place again even after eleven years without so much as passing it by in all that time that Peters guessed they figured they were getting lucky. And now they weren't lucky. They were like dogs who'd lost the scent.

"There's a smaller room off to the rear there. Might check it."

He leveled the shotgun in front of him again. But it was training, mostly. It was habit. They weren't here and they hadn't been. The cave smelled of earth and damp and seawater. If they'd stayed any time at all it would have smelled . . . otherwise.

Manetti found the broken pitchfork tine way back in a corner.

Apart from that, nothing.

Peters felt himself sag, his body go slack. He took a pull on the whiskey.

They walked out the way they came in.

Nobody said anything for a while. They started down the mountain.

The sea breeze felt good blowing through his hair. Good and clean.

Midway down he asked Manetti about the dogs and Manetti said they'd be in from Bangor by two o'clock along with another twenty troopers.

As of now they had two more parties of six men each working a narrow range north and south along the coastline. The troopers and the dogs would take

the woods when they arrived, spread farther north to Lubec and farther south to Cutler, and some of the dogs would work the scent off the Kaltsas place.

Two o'clock gave them four more hours of daylight. Four hours.

He stepped down off the path.

It was exactly here that he had put the pump to the woman's eye so there was no possibility of missing and pulled the trigger. It was already too late for Caggiano. Her jaws were still in his neck when they pulled her off him.

Manetti saw him pause.

"Everything okay, George?" he said.

Peters nodded.

"Look, you found the cave. You told us where else you think they're likely to be and what you think they're likely to do. I don't see that there's any more reason for me to put you through this. Maybe you should go home and get some sleep and let us go from here."

Peters shook his head. "I know 'em," he said. "I shot them all to hell that day and I saw what they had in there and I questioned the survivor. You need me. I

know what you're thinking and it's kind of you. But you'd do a whole lot better to ask me nicely to please stick around."

Manetti smiled. "Hey. Stick around, will you, George?"

"Sure. Sure I will."

He stopped in the sand a moment and stared up the rock face.

From where he stood it was almost impossible to see the entrance. They'd chosen it well. He wondered how they'd done choosing the new one.

And thinking that he must have looked sort of pained because Manetti said, "How was it? Pretty rough walking back in there?"

"I've had better memories," he said. "Better days."

He reached for the pint in his pocket again and unscrewed the cap. He said, "But it'll get rougher, Vic. You're going to want to join me before it's through. Hell, you probably will join me."

And drank from the bottle.

2:20 P.M.

Amy looked at Claire across the kitchen table and knew she'd done the right thing inviting her.

"You look tired," she said. "You getting any sleep at all?"

"Not enough. Not lately."

She reached for Melissa's tiny hand. The hand immediately gripped her index finger. She never stopped nursing for a second. "She's so *beautiful*," Claire said.

Amy's breast was getting sore. She'd need to switch over in a minute or two. But she smiled. Claire was right. Melissa ~~was~~ beautiful. Soft pink skin, a dusting of fine brown hair. And the prettiest big brown eyes. She even *smelled* beautiful—all sweet breath and warm clean skin.

Melissa had been sleeping when they arrived. Claire and Luke had tiptoed into the bedroom and Claire said afterward that it was love at first sight. Even Luke was beaming—as if it were his own baby sister he was staring at.

Claire withdrew her finger. The baby clutched Amy's breast instead.

"They're serving him the papers today," Claire said.

"It's about time."

"It took them till Monday just to find him. Turns out he was back with Marion again, back in the office. Working off the books. As legal consultant or something. Not a partner again, god knows, but back."

"Marion. *That* bitch."

"I don't know why, but for some reason she seems to be willing to do just about anything for him."

"You want to bet she's screwing him?"

"I don't know. I never thought Marion was the type to get involved with a partner. I thought she was just your basic shark. But get this, though. It was Marion's *secretary* who notarized the loan."

"Ow!" It was Amy's nipple that hurt, not the information.

Claire flinched. Amy almost laughed. It was as though it were Claire's breast and not Amy's that the tiny jaws had pinched.

She shifted Melissa to the other breast. Melissa didn't cry. Miraculously, she almost never cried now.

Claire smiled, looking relieved, as the baby nuzzled in.

It struck her as a little strange. She'd nursed Luke, hadn't she? Of course she had. She remembered it clearly. So why the squeamishness over a little bite?

She let it pass.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I want to get this right. Marion's secretary notarized the loan to cover his debt to the firm, correct?"

"Uh-huh."

"So she knew all about the forgery. They both did."

"She had to."

"Absolutely unbelievable."

Unbeknownst to Claire, Steven had taken out a loan nine months ago, about a year into their separation, for well over a half million dollars—Amy couldn't remember the figure exactly. The loan was to cover half the out-of-court settlement of a former client's suit against the firm. The firm was absorbing the other half.

Steven had somehow mismanaged the client's funds. It wasn't the first time he'd been accused of that and this time the firm was holding him accountable.

So he put up their home in Greenwich as collateral. And forged Claire's signature to the documents.

Half a million was the entire value of their house, less the mortgage.

At the time, with Steven's support as erratic as it was, Claire and Luke were just barely getting by.

Then he got himself fired, lost his partnership over some new problem. Nobody knew what, and nobody at the firm was telling.

They just called in his loan.

First the support dried up. Then Steven disappeared completely.

He'd given up his lease on the apartment in Manhattan and left no forwarding address. Neither Claire nor Luke had seen or heard from him in over six months. Christmas and Luke's birthday had come and gone without a word from him.

Her job as a secretary didn't even cover the

mortgage payments, never mind food and clothing.

And now his creditors were howling. Howling to Claire.

Hell, they couldn't *find* Steven.

And the loan wasn't his only forgery, either. He'd signed her name to their tax return last year so she wouldn't know they were into the IRS for over a quarter of a million dollars.

So the IRS was howling too.

They didn't care who signed the goddamn papers. It was a joint return and they wanted the money.

God only knew what else was out there. Waiting to pounce.

In a few months' time she'd gone from pretty well off to flat broke, with no credit and in debt to the neck. The half-million-dollar loan, the mortgage, gas and electric, credit cards, car payments—all were with collection agencies by now.

She didn't even answer the phone anymore; there were so many dunning calls. She spent cash she didn't have on a phone machine to screen them.

Amy and David had loaned her the money for a lawyer. The lawyer was trying to track Steven down

to serve him papers for the divorce hearing—he'd done that now, finally—and work out reduction of liability deals with all parties concerned, based upon the forgeries. But even so she was going to lose the house. Pretty much all of it. If she was lucky she'd come out of it with thirty thousand dollars, the lawyer said.

She was thirty-seven. Luke was eight. They had maybe thirty thousand to build a whole new life for themselves. It wasn't much.

Amy could feel her hurt. And her fear.

It crawled across the table to her like a spider and slid across her spine.

She hadn't seen Claire in two months now. Eight weeks. It was not much time. But the effects of strain had articulated themselves rapidly. The fine skin beneath the wide brown eyes looked bruised from lack of sleep. There were strands of silver in the long dark hair. Claire's body had always been lean and tight, even after Luke. Now it seemed to sag somehow, forced in upon itself. As though holding for too long a time a single, shallow breath.

She wished she could just hug her, hold her and

tell her everything would be all right, that everything would be fine—even though it wasn't going to be all right, it was going to be a long rough haul and there was no use making believe otherwise.

She did the next best thing. She handed her Melissa across the table.

“Here. Hold her for a while. I'll get us some more coffee.”

Melissa smiled, swiping with her hands, staring up at Claire delightedly, her eyes getting bigger and bigger.

Claire smiled too, brightening.

“Melissa!” she said, and started making the sounds people make when they're holding a baby. Melissa cooed right back at her.

There's nothing like three months' worth of baby for turning you around, she thought.

Unless, of course, it's four in the morning.

Stop bitching, she thought. *Things are so much better now.*

She returned with the coffee.

“Is Luke going to be all right out there?” Claire asked.

"Sure. David'll keep an eye on him. Besides, there's nothing much to get into except grass and bugs and trees."

"You're by the sea, aren't you?"

"Half a mile away. You figure he'll go that far?"

"I doubt it. He doesn't know much about the country."

"We'll take him down later if you want, show you both all the sights. The cliffs down at the point are pretty spectacular."

"Those I don't want him anywhere near."

"Once he sees them I think I can guarantee he'll be careful."

The phone rang. Amy got up and answered it.

Melissa was holding on to Claire's finger again, cooing happily.

Amy listened to the voice on the phone, too amazed to say anything, though there were a thousand things to say.

The voice went on for what seemed like a very long while. "Wait a minute," she said.

And when she came back to the table it was hard

to keep the fury off her face. For Claire's sake, she tried.

Howdare he? she thought.

She reached for her baby.

"It's for you," she said. Claire looked puzzled.

"It's him," she said. "It's Steven. He says he's coming up here. He says he's on his way."

2:43 P.M.

The day was turning hot and slightly humid for this time of year.

David was with Will Campbell under the deck, the tarps pulled back so that Campbell could inspect the lumber.

Luke was there. He'd asked David's permission to go through his toolbox. Most of the tools had once belonged to David's father—which meant that they were basically unused—but David saw no harm in letting the boy root around in there. Through the open door to the shop he could watch Luke pulling out layers of sandpaper and packages of nails and screws to get at the hammers, rasps and screwdrivers underneath. He knew Luke was listening, interested for some reason in what they had to say, though he doubted the boy could understand very much of it.

They were standing by a pile of twelve-foot-long two-by-sixes tinted green, southern yellow pine that they'd use for the bottom layer, heavily treated

against damp rot and insects. Planning the attack on the addition.

Will Campbell was a thin rangy man of about fifty, his face so deeply lined and tanned that to David he always seemed to be frowning.

He stamped out the butt of his Pall Mall. His hand moved gracefully over the board he was sighting.

"Pretty good," he said.

That coming from Campbell was high praise. David knew next to nothing about lumber but he was glad to hear it.

"But we gotta get 'em down fast," Campbell said. "A day in the sun and they'll warp like swizzle sticks. They'll do the trick, though. Now these . . ."

He stepped over to a much larger pile about four and a half feet high by four feet wide, a mix of spruce and balsam. Two-by-tens mostly, ranging from eight to twenty feet long. This was the framing lumber, the underpinnings for what was going to be the firststory flooring.

". . . these are *fine*," he said.

"Fine?" He smiled. He'd never heard Campbell use the word.

“Good local stuff right out of the Big Woods. Hardly any reaction wood at all that I can see. Good and regular.”

“What’s the Big Woods?” asked Luke. He stood in the door of the shop, a claw hammer in his hand that was much too heavy for him, pounding awkwardly at invisible nails.

“You’re in it, son, sort of,” said Campbell. “Scrappy little part of it of course, way out here on the coast. But from Bangor on up’s all Big Woods territory. Old growth. Logging country. Red spruce, black spruce, white spruce, cedar. Rivers, lakes, streams. You can pull trout out of the streams and you can flush a bear or a moose if you’re of a mind to.”

“You can?”

“Sometimes.”

“I want to see a bear!” Luke took a wider swing, hammering a bear skull.

Campbell laughed. “In the wild? No you don’t.”

“Yes I do.”

“A bear can move fast as an automobile over short distances and start up even faster. Think you can outrun a car, son?”

Luke frowned and thought about it. "Well, maybe if I was standing kind of far away I'd like to see one. Like through binoculars."

"Maybe then," said Campbell. "Sure. Why not?"

"Look over on the first shelf there," said David. "Right behind you."

Luke walked into the shop. The shelf, David knew, was just about reachable for him. He was tall for his age, with long thin arms like his mother's. They watched him look around and find them. He started to reach up and then caught himself, stopped and turned.

"Can I?" he asked.

"Sure you can," said David.

The binoculars were his father's too, old and not particularly high-powered, but in working order.

Luke looped the thong around his neck, dropped the claw hammer noisily into the toolbox and looked through the lenses.

"Know how to focus?" said David.

Luke shook his head. David walked over and showed him.

"See, you've got two images here. Now you break

the lenses either toward your nose or away from your nose until you've got just the one image," he said. "Only one. Then you turn this knob until whatever you want to see is good and clear."

Luke tried it, pointed them at Campbell.

"Hey!" he said, smiling.

"You got it, huh?"

"Yeah!"

"Good."

He turned the lenses out toward the field and focused again.

"Radical!"

Our Turtle friends again, thought David. He wondered who Luke's favorite was, Michelangelo or Donatello. Personally he leaned toward Leonardo, though he guessed that basically Turtle Power was Turtle Power. As opposed, for instance, to the Power of Greyskull.

"You like 'em?"

"Yeah!"

"I'll loan them to you for the duration."

"What's a duration?"

"As long as you're here."

"And then I have to give them back again?"

"We'll see."

Luke looked hopeful. David guessed he was at that age when kids got very much into possessions.

"I'm gonna go look around, okay?"

"Go ahead."

He headed through the oak trees out into the field, stopped and turned and focused on the windows of the house. Campbell lit a cigarette and they watched him for a while.

"Seems like a nice boy," said Campbell.

"He is," said David.

"I'm not the sort of man who minds kids," said Campbell. "If he wants to hang around some when we start working it's okay by me. Sometimes it helps a boy to feel he's useful. 'Specially a boy with trouble."

"Trouble?"

He hadn't told Campbell a thing about Luke, or for that matter about Claire and Steven. Only that Luke was his godson and that he and Claire would be

staying awhile.

"I've raised two boys and a girl myself, and I've built a lot of houses for a lot of people. Things come out in people when they're building houses. Things you sometimes don't really want to see. Stress, I guess you'd say. There's a lot of money involved, of course. House is a big investment. There's a lot of decisions that look small, but aren't. Not at the time. Hell, they're crucial. I'm not saying I've seen it all by now, but I did see a pretty good fella kick his dog one time just because his windows hadn't arrived the day we were ready to set 'em. Kids get trouble too. You see it sometimes."

It was the most he'd ever heard Campbell say on a subject. Any subject.

Campbell pulled on the Pall Mall and pointed to the deck above.

"We'll do this here in tongue-and-groove quarter-sawn fir," he said. "Soon as we finish the addition. You'll see. It'll look real nice."

Luke came to the edge of the clearing and put up the binoculars. The woods sprang into focus. Suddenly

deep.

He wondered if it was okay to go in, if there were any bears in there. He wondered if bears could climb trees or if he just had to look for them along the ground.

Well, he was going in. He was an explorer, a scout looking for Indians or bear and he was going in.

He wouldn't go far.

The woods were cooler, damper. He liked the feel of the air in there, on his face and bare arms. He liked the green smell. He was glad he wasn't wearing shorts because in places the brush was thick and he had to plow through. He knew enough to watch for stickers and go around them. Sometimes if the brush wasn't *too* thick he'd jump right in and then crash through like you'd do if a bear were chasing you fast as a car. Then he'd come to a bunch of trees and slow down and there would be only the soft brown needles crackling under his Reeboks.

He was in a place like that now.

He was standing on a hill in a grove of pine trees and it was shady all around.

He raised the binoculars. He scouted the ground

as far as he could see for Indians creeping through the brush below.

This was *fun*.

This was *scary*.

Partly it was scary because the game was scary, because Indians and bears were naturally scary, and partly it was the woods, because the woods was a wild place, a place he'd never been to before—and he *was* an explorer in a way. That part was real.

Something moved in the brush to his left; he heard the rustle, but by the time he turned and focused it was gone.

There were birds above him; he could hear them calling each other. He decided to try to find a nest. He was an explorer and he was starving in the wilderness and he needed the birds' eggs to keep him from dying.

Starving, he trudged forward to the very top of the hill.

Exhausted, he raised the binoculars. He scanned the trees.

He saw the platform immediately.

It was lodged between the branches of an oak tree

the next hill over. The hill was a little bit higher than this one. He'd be able to see everything all around.

He forgot about starvation.

He ran down the hill until the ground turned mossy beneath him, slippery. Then he walked. He avoided a patch of stickers. The uphill climb was rocky and not too steep so his footing was good.

And there it was.

The treehouse was old—he didn't know how old but the wood was gray, weathered like David's porch. He wondered if it was safe. It was pretty high up. Maybe five times bigger than he was.

Scary.

He didn't want to fall.

The steps nailed to the tree trunk looked okay, though. The wood was thick and each step had two big nails hammered into it and none of the boards were cracked that he could see.

He'd start with the steps and see how it went.

The tree had grown at an incline, leaning slightly, so his climb wasn't hard. He didn't look down, just up to see if the next board above him seemed safe. There was one toward the top that was cracked at

one end from the nail on over so he tugged on it to see if it would pull free. It didn't. He kept going.

Soon he was up.

There were four posts supporting a railing that went all the way around the platform at what looked like about waist level for him. He grabbed one of the posts and shook it. It wobbled a little, but it was pretty sturdy.

He looked for breaks in the platform flooring. There were leaves scattered around so he couldn't see it all, but what he could see didn't discourage him.

He hauled himself onto the platform.

He stood and squinted into the sunlight.

It was like being at the top of the world.

From here you could see all the way through the woods to David's house. He was a little surprised at how far away it was, how far he'd come. He raised the binoculars to see if he could spot David or Mr. Campbell but he couldn't, there were too many trees.

He looked down. And that surprised him too.

He really was way up there.

For some reason looking *out* was a whole lot

better than looking down so that was what he did. He walked carefully to the other side of the platform, testing each step. The boards held. Through the trees the sky seemed to glint at him. He raised the binoculars again. He was amazed.

From here you could see the sea.

And now that he thought about it, you could smell it, too. Something salty and seaweedy coming toward him on the breeze. It reminded him somehow of the breath of a cat. Nice, but a little rotten.

It reminded him of the day his dad had taken him to Sandwich. They'd spent most of the day in a bar with a friend of his. Business, his dad had said—though it didn't sound like business. But then later in the day he'd let him go alone down to the ocean, to the rocks there, and look for crabs in the water. Maybe that was when they talked about business, he didn't know. He'd seen a couple of crabs he liked watching and when his father came to get him he didn't want to leave.

He cried. His dad had walked away from him.

He wondered how far away the ocean was from here. You couldn't tell exactly.

Thinking of his dad made him angry and sad the way it always seemed to do, a funny lonely feeling that made him want to punch or kick something. Like there was nobody around anywhere but him, just him, whether he was up in a treehouse really completely alone or sitting at his desk at school with his teacher and all the other kids around. And having to have that feeling, it wasn't fair at all. He knew he wasn't *really* alone. He knew it was dumb because his mom was always there, he had Ed and Tommy, he had friends, but there was still this stupid alone feeling and he still wanted to kick or hit something.

He didn't dare kick anything up here but maybe some leaves. Kicking a bunch of leaves wouldn't do him any good. But he did it anyway.

And something rattled across the platform.

Something white.

He squatted and sifted through the leaves.

Bones!

He didn't know what kind but they were bones, all right. Small, most of them, about the size of the bones of the model Tyrannosaurus that sat on his desk at home. Just a little dirty from being under the

leaves, with some little red ants crawling over them.

He brushed away the ants. He collected the bones carefully one at a time and put them in his pocket. He got a pocketful.

He'd ask David what they were. David would know. Or Mr. Campbell.

Awesome!

What a neat place! *His* place. His *secret* place.

He grabbed the post and started down the ladder.

And got two steps down when something shook the tree above him.

He felt it on the ladder. A trembling in the tree itself. He froze there. Looking up.

A branch was swaying above the treehouse, maybe ten feet up. He couldn't see anything through the leaves. But something was there. Or had been.

Maybe it was gone now.

A squirrel or something.

And maybe it wasn't.

But the thrill of fear was there. That hadn't gone, it prickled the skin all over his body. And somehow that made the treehouse even better, that something

had scared him there.

What a place!

He hurried down the ladder.

3:25 P.M.

“There’s nothing I can do,” said Claire. “He’s on the *road* already.”

Admittedly it was early. But the vodka tonic helped. And since Melissa was in for a nap now, Amy joined her.

“Where?”

“I don’t know where. He wouldn’t say. Just that he’d see us tonight. So we could talk. Jesus, the last thing I want to do tonight is to talk to Steven. Maybe two months ago I’d have wanted to. For Luke’s sake if nothing else. But now . . .”

She heard Campbell’s pickup pull out of the driveway. It made her feel strangely adrift, abandoned. She didn’t even know the man except for ten minutes’ talk in the kitchen. But he was normalcy, he was the regular stuff of David’s and Amy’s everyday life—one more person on their side, and by extension on *her* side. *It’s crazy*, she thought. But she hated it that he was leaving.

“I don’t get it,” Amy said. “He doesn’t want the

divorce?"

"I don't know. He said he wants to talk about it. He's mad about something. He had that tone. Controlled. Edgy. Like he gets when he's holding something back that he doesn't want to deal with right away but he sure as hell will when the time comes. He'd been drinking."

"Good. Maybe he'll drive himself into a tree."

Claire reached for her drink. Her hand was shaking. She willed it steady.

"I don't want him to see Luke," she said. "He missed Christmas. He missed his *birthday*."

"You think Luke will want to see him?"

"I don't know. Probably. Probably he won't think about the last six months. He'll just be excited to see him again. He's his father."

And what nasty accident of genetics was that? she thought. That Luke should be such a decent kid, with such a father?

Oh, Luke was trouble. He was angry. He was defiant. Especially to her he was defiant lately. But partly that was his age and partly it was resentment and confusion over Steven being gone and the two

of them being all alone together. Partly it was Luke feeling powerless to make things better. And partly it was her own fear. Her own frustration and anger ingested and absorbed by him.

He was angry all right. Yet there was a firm core of kindness in Luke, of caring and concern. You saw it in the way he'd looked at Melissa before. You saw it in the way he treated other kids. He wasn't a bully and he didn't appreciate kids who were. Though god knows he was big enough to qualify if he wanted to. He was even nice to the girls in his class.

At his age, that was something.

"You know he still has Steven's Christmas present wrapped in his room? A bird. A blue ceramic bird they made in school. It's absolutely terrible. He has to *tell* you it's a bird or you'd never know what it was. But he made it for Steven."

She was going to cry.

No you're not, she thought.

Amy helped, reached across the table and took her hand. The same gentle squeeze that had stopped the tears dozens of times over the years. Stopped them or started them flowing, as need be.

The back door opened and she started, afraid for a moment that it was Luke. She wasn't ready to see Luke yet, to have to talk to him about Steven. *I hate this*, she thought. *It's been six months. Am I supposed to let him see him now?*

But it was only David. He took one look at them and his smile faded. He stopped in the doorway.

"What's up?" he said.

"Steven's on his way," said Amy.

"What?"

"He just called half an hour ago."

David closed the door behind him. He went to the antique Coolerator, took out a beer and opened it. He closed the refrigerator door. He did all of these things carefully, as though door and refrigerator and bottle were all extremely fragile, as though they might break out of sheer molecular tension.

"What about the restraining order?" he said.

"He seems to be choosing to ignore it," said Amy.

"Oh yeah? The hell he is."

He went to the phone and started dialing.

"Who are you calling?"

"Vic Manetti. The police."

"Wait. Wait a minute," said Claire.

David looked at her. *He's a very nice man,* thought Claire, *and he cares. But I'm not at all sure about this.* He replaced the phone on the receiver and looked at her.

"What," he said.

"Luke," she said. "I'm thinking about Luke."

He walked to the table. She could feel his anger and indignation held tightly in check.

"What about Luke, Claire? Luke saw you backed against the kitchen wall one night while Steven worked off his drunk by slapping you around. Isn't that what the restraining order was about in the first place?"

"Yes."

"So what *about* Luke?"

"Steven's his father. It's been six months."

"So?"

"Luke misses him. He doesn't even talk about it anymore but that's just protective. He misses him anyway. I wish he didn't but he does. And I just don't

know if I have the right to—”

“Of course you have the right. You have every right to—”

“Steven was drunk that night.”

“He could be drunk right now,” said Amy.

She felt suddenly exhausted. There was no denying it. The voice on the phone was a drinker's voice, alternately slurred and too crisply under control. She remembered the night in the kitchen, screaming for Luke to get out of the room, to get back into bed, and Luke running, terrified into total unnatural silence. She remembered feeling Steven's physical presence loom over her like the threat of bloody death or worse, like a kind of rape, while he slapped her face and punched her in the ribs and stomach and breasts, *targeting* the breasts as though they had some sick special meaning to him, knowing the meaning because for months he had not wanted to make love to her, he had wanted to drink instead, and she had asked him why that night, pleading for their marriage, not knowing he was drunk at first, and he was telling her why, with each blow to her breasts he was telling her why, that it was

her womanness he loathed, he hated, her unspeakable flesh.

"I'll call," she said.

"Let me," said David gently. He put his hand on her shoulder. "I know some of these people."

He went back to the phone and dialed. Claire looked at Amy, and Amy nodded to her, saying, it's the right thing. It's the only thing. And squeezed her hand again.

"Hello? Gloria? Is Vic there? It's David Halbard up on River Road."

The air seemed suddenly stiller, the house quieter, now that it was happening. Now that he was actually calling the police to keep Steven away from them.

She remembered her dream last night. He was some sort of vampire or dog or snake. He was lying across her body and had pinned her to her bed. His teeth were in her neck. He was a dog and he started to pull back his head with her flesh in his teeth and shake.

The dog dream, in variations, went all the way back to her childhood. She would wake having peed the bed.

It was the first time the dog was Steven.

“Uh-huh? Okay. Well, we’ve got a kind of situation here as well. What it amounts to is we’ve got houseguests, a woman and her eight-year-old son. The woman’s an old friend and she’s involved in a very messy divorce right now. There’s a restraining order against her husband.

“Yes, physical violence involved. He’s not supposed to see them under any circumstances. None whatsoever. But now we’ve had a call from him saying he’s on his way up here from Connecticut. He says he’ll arrive tonight sometime. We don’t know when or what the hell to do once he gets here.”

He looked puzzled.

“What do you mean have I got a gun? Gloria, are you kidding?”

He listened, half smiling at first. They watched him. His voice got quieter.

“Can you give me any idea why?” he said. “I see. All right, we’ll try it. But I’m not sure it’ll do a whole lot of good. There’ll be somebody there if we? . . . Okay . . . Thanks, Gloria. Take care, all right?”

He hung up, walked to the table, sat down, and

drank his beer.

"That was truly *strange*," he said.

"What," said Amy.

"Gloria says that Vic and most of the sheriff's office are out investigating a murder. The state police are involved, too. They're strictly skeleton staff over there. I told her what we had and she said that, in the first place, they can't do anything until Steven actually arrives—which I guess I expected—but that if he insists on seeing Claire to call them, and that they'd 'try like hell to find somebody to send over,' was the way she put it. She said not to let him in the house if I could possibly help it, to try to talk him into turning around and going home again."

"What was that bit about the *gun*?"

"That was the weird part. Gloria's a bit flaky sometimes god knows and I don't know if she was just playing Miss Melodrama or what, but she actually suggested I order him off at gunpoint. Or anybody else I didn't know personally who came around tonight. Could you see me standing on the porch ordering Steven out of here, pointing a shotgun at him like . . . like Elvis in *Flaming Star*?

Who the hell owns a gun? And even if we did . . .”

The screen door slammed. Claire jumped.

It was Luke. Beaming.

“Hey! Look, you guys! Look what I got!”

He was holding out his hand, coming toward her, and she might have scolded him for interrupting, some other time she probably would have, but somehow she *wanted* to be interrupted at the moment, with all this talk of guns and murder and with Steven coming and calling the police in the first place, so she smiled at him, what she hoped was a bright normal smile, and looked down into his hand at the tiny white bones that chance had arranged almost to correspond to *his* bones, to the bones of the palm of his hand splayed toward the fingers, as though she were looking inside him, into his flesh. At *him*, really. At frailty.

At mortality.

PART III

EVENING

5:35 P.M.

Steven Carey saw her on the bridge, backpack on the ground in front of her, just beyond the Kennebunk entrance to the highway.

It was rare you saw a girl hitching alone these days. He was in the slow lane doing sixty-five. His reactions were still very good. He pulled over.

Through the rearview mirror he saw her haul the heavy pack up onto her shoulder and run awkwardly toward the car. The weight of the pack made her run at an angle. It threw her balance off. She looked like the cat he'd run over one night after a high school dance. He'd been driving his father's old Pontiac. He'd stopped the car in the street to watch the cat in the headlights. The cat was leaking brain fluid and trying to run away, running at an angle.

He used a switch on the panel of the Mercedes' armrest to unlock the back door and another to roll down the window on the frontseat passenger side. The girl appeared at the window and looked at him.

She looked wary. But you could see that she was

impressed by the navy blue Paul Stuart suit and the darker blue Mercedes.

Blue was the color for inspiring trust in juries.

“Hi,” he said. He smiled. “Put the pack in the back. Hop in.”

The girl did as she was told. He watched her through the rearview mirror. She wasn't particularly pretty—nose a little too sharp, face a little too round. Eighteen or so and about ten pounds overweight. Thin brown hair. The usual jeans. And a pale green washed-out T-shirt that read, “Where the hell is Montserrat?” on the front and gave you a map of the Caribbean on the back.

She was strong. She handled the backpack well. And well mannered. She was careful not to slam the door.

She wore a bra.

They all did these days.

She got in front and he pulled away from the shoulder. He punched in the cigarette lighter and drew out a Winston.

“How far are you going?” she asked.

Her voice was breathy. He was disinclined toward

breathy.

"Pretty much all the way up the coast," he said. He laughed. "Some godforsaken place called Dead River. You?"

"Portland."

He nodded. "There's an exit right off here."

"I know," she said. "Thanks." And finally she smiled. "Nice car," she said.

"Thank you."

There wasn't much traffic. He drove easily, carefully, edging it up to sixty-five again and no further.

The lighter hadn't popped. He pulled it out and it wasn't even warm. The goddamn thing was broken. He felt like throwing the goddamn thing out the goddamn window. He took a pack of matches out of his jacket pocket and lit the Winston.

It was getting on to dusk, and though he had no need of them yet, he switched on the headlights.

"What's in Portland?" he asked her.

She was biting at one of her fingernails. "My boyfriend goes to school there."

The girl had a boyfriend.

The girl was getting laid.

The girl took off the bra and the boyfriend sucked her nipples.

"You're a student too?" he asked.

"I quit for a year. I wanted to work for a while. I go back in September."

"Sure. Plenty of time for work," he said.

She nodded. "I guess."

Plenty of time, he thought. *I ought to know.* Military academy to college to law school to practice practice practice . . .

She bit her nail again.

Marion did that.

A very bad habit.

He had caught her doing it this very morning, sitting in bed with the sheet up over her lap, leaning down squinting at her stocks listed in the morning paper so that her long thin breasts lay over the roll of fat in her middle and her tousled black hair hung over her face. She was chewing at the nail of the index finger of her left hand, and when she bit it off she put

it in the ashtray next to her Virginia Slim Menthol Light.

He saw her doing this just as he stepped out of the shower, and he was already wondering what to do with her by then, in fact he'd been wondering since the night before when she told him they would no longer be able to use him at the firm past the end of the month, either on or off the books, that the plan to rehire him was scotched now once and for all because Linfield had seen him in the office last week and Linfield was complaining to her as senior partner that here was this person still working for them who had lost him a fucking bundle, and what in the hell was he doing there. He would not forget. He would not be convinced or mollified and Mr. Cocksucker B. Linfield was their third fucking biggest client. Sorry.

He was thinking what to do about her—about someone who wanted his cock in the dark of night but had no allegiance and no honor while the cigarette burned and the fingernail smoldered in the ashtray. He could smell it. The smell of burning flesh. She was naked and fat and checking her

stocks in the newspaper.

His hands gripped the steering wheel. He eased them, flexed the fingers.

The girl was frowning.

"You know? I think I know Dead River," she said. "Isn't that up near Lubec? Way up near the border?"

"I don't know about Lubec, but it's nearly all the way to Canada, all right. Actually I've never been there. I just looked at the map and figured you could take Ninety-five up to around Brunswick and then cut over to Highway One, past Boothbay Harbor on up." He flashed her a grin. "Sound about right?"

She nodded. "I have an older cousin who used to work the fishing boats up that way every summer. Earned himself some money for college. That's why it's familiar.

"It's pretty nice country. Why didn't you just fly?"

"Fly?"

"Sure. I mean, it's a really long drive. You could have flown to Machias. At least that far. And I think there might even be a little airport around Lubec. I don't remember." She smiled shyly. "I mean, you don't look like you'd have a whole lot of trouble

affording it, you know?"

He laughed. He stubbed out the Winston.

"The problem is I'm a nervous flyer. I hit a downdraft coming home into Kennedy one time that scared the hell out of me. Once burned, twice shy, you know? That kind of thing."

They like it when you appear vulnerable, he thought. Even though in this case the downdraft story was true.

"Kennedy? You've come all the way up from New York?"

"Connecticut, actually. I was visiting . . . a friend there."

"Oh."

He had to be careful. He was giving her too much information. He was already memorable. The suit, the red silk tie, the Mercedes.

He probably should not have picked her up in the first place. He'd wanted the company.

It gave him an idea.

"Listen. Maybe you could help me out here." He smiled his most disarming smile and shook his head. "The thing of it is, I really don't know *where* the

hell I'm going and I'm hopeless reading road signs at night. What would you say to driving up with me? Ride shotgun. Just get me up there. Then I'd drive you over to the airport at Machias or Lubec or wherever and put you on a plane back to Portland." He laughed. "That is assuming you aren't afraid of flying too. On my tab, naturally. And I'll give you fifty, seventy-five dollars for your trouble. It's going to get dark in a couple hours. You'd really be helping me out. What do you say?"

The girl just looked at him, caught completely by surprise. Well, he was a stranger after all. He guessed she would be.

"I . . ."

"What time are you supposed to be there? Is there anybody you could call to say you'd be a little later than expected? Your boyfriend? We could stop at a pay phone somewhere. Call's on me of course. I'd really appreciate it. You said it was pretty country."

"But how could I . . . ? I mean, Portland's less than an hour from here."

"So?"

"Dead River has to be two hundred miles up the

coast. More, probably. It'll be nine or ten o'clock before you even get there. By the time I got a plane back to Portland, even if I was *lucky* it'd be midnight!"

He laughed. "Think of it as an adventure."

She stared at him.

Staring was rude. The girl wasn't as well mannered as he'd thought.

He honestly couldn't see why it should be such a terribly big deal to her. It was only a couple of hours. A nice pleasant drive in the country. He'd picked her up, hadn't he? Given her a ride? Didn't she owe him a little something?

"Make it a hundred," he said. "Think about it."

She flinched as he reached abruptly across her lap to the glove compartment and pulled out the bottle. Her flinching amused him.

Skittish little thing.

He offered her the vodka. He smiled.

"Let me buy you a drink," he said.

She shook her head.

"Oh, come on. You don't want to force me to drink

alone, do you? What's your name, by the way?"

He unscrewed the cap on the bottle.

"S-Susan."

"Susan. That's a nice name. Suzie. Suzie Cream-cheese. Lazy Susan. Suzerain. Suzerain means feudal lord, did you know that? Someone to whom allegiance is due. Let's see. Oh Susannah. Sweet Sue. He ever call you that? Your boyfriend? Sweet Sue?"

He drank.

"I . . . I think I'd like to . . . get out now," she said.
"Stop anywhere, okay?"

"Out?"

"Yes."

"You're going to Portland, aren't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"You want to get out?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You're drinking."

"That's true. I am."

He drank again. *Fuck her*, he thought. She was

either going with him or she wasn't, and either way she was going nowhere.

It had been a very bad day, he reflected. And obviously it wasn't getting any better because the goddamn fucking girl was giving him trouble and would probably continue to give him trouble and the lighter didn't work.

The day had been very bad in one way. And very good in another.

It had been a long time, he thought. A real long time indeed.

Not since Jimmy whatsisname. Over on Livingston Avenue.

They'd been playing in the apple orchard, a bunch of them he recognized from school. What was it, third grade? Right. They'd been playing soldier, using the little green apples fallen from the trees for grenades, tossing them and falling flat into the tall grass, hiding, crawling toward one another like troops in combat. Nobody had heard him approach and nobody had seen him. And at first nobody knew that the rocks he was throwing were not just the same little green apples they all were using. Not until

one of them hit Jimmy in the head and he went down bleeding.

And died in a coma. They never knew that he was the one throwing the rocks and he never told them. He was good at secrets. And there was no point in them knowing anyway because Jimmy was dead.

And now there was no good reason for them knowing about Marion either because Marion was dead too, the victim of a prowler who in the early-morning hours had strangled her with the cord of her hair dryer and had then stolen her stereo and CD player, her television and jewelry—all of it smashed and scattered in a dump outside of Hartford, Connecticut.

Again, nobody had seen him.

Her cleaning lady had been there the day before and she was very thorough so he had no particular worry about fingerprints. He knew the routine. He'd wiped off everything he touched. He had a very good memory for incidentals.

And they'd kept their affair quite secret.

Marion had insisted on it. A matter of office decorum.

He had done it very calmly. Not so much out of anger as because she had deserved to die for feeling free to so easily betray him. And because he *wanted* to.

She was fat and her breasts were long and ugly and he wanted to.

That was the good part of the day and it was very good indeed.

There had been no slipups, he was sure of that. No police would be knocking at his door. He had gone to work in the usual way with the television and jewelry and all the rest of it in the trunk of his car and accomplished much, and only became agitated when Claire's lawyer served him the papers, right there in full view of most of the staff.

It was completely normal, unremarkable behavior. You were being divorced, you got agitated.

No one would suspect him of a thing.

He wondered if they'd found her yet.

He'd been careful to rape the body afterward, just for authenticity's sake. He'd been surprised, actually, at the size of his hardon. Better than she'd managed to do for him in life as far as he could remember. But

it was really the one-two-three punch he was after. *Assault, theft, rape.* You saw it every day. The police would be looking for a thief with priors of sexual offense and they wouldn't tend to look much further.

"So what do you think?" he said.

"About what?"

"About driving with me."

The girl's voice had gotten smaller, even breathier. He liked that. It meant she respected him.

Claire's voice was deep, almost masculine.

He was going to see Claire. He was going to have to talk to her.

"I'm visiting my wife and son, if that's your problem. I'm a married man. Look."

He showed her the ring.

"I . . . I've got to get to Portland. I'm expected, you know?"

"When?"

"In . . . in about an hour."

The girl was lying. She was hitching. The time would depend on the rides. They wouldn't know when to expect her.

He drank from the bottle.

“So you don’t want to go with me? You won’t do me a favor?”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can. You just don’t *want* to. Might as well say it. Go ahead. Tell me you just don’t want to.”

“I . . .”

“Say, ‘I just don’t want to.’ “

“I . . .”

She was scared now. Really scared. The girl was shitting her pants over there.

“Say it!”

“I don’t want to!”

He smiled. “That’s better. Now you’re telling me the truth. Okay. Get out.”

It was getting on to dusk. There was one car well ahead of him and another far behind. He checked the speedometer. He was still doing a little under sixty-five.

“Go on,” he said. “Get out.”

“You have to . . . you’ve got to pull over.”

“No I don’t. Get out. Go on. Get the fuck out.”

He was calm, smiling. He took another drink of the vodka. He glanced at the girl. The girl was crying. That was okay. At least she wasn't being too noisy about it.

"I . . . can't . . ."

"Okay. Throw your pack out, then."

"Huh?"

He used the button on the armrest to unroll the rear passenger-side window.

"Throw your pack out the window and I'll pull over. I promise."

"Why? . . . Why do you want to do that?"

"I just do. You want me to pull over? Then throw it out the window."

At first he thought maybe she was *too* scared, that she wasn't going to do it, that all she was going to do was sit there looking at him. But then she must have thought better about it because she leaned over the seat and started to haul up the heavy pack and finally she had it halfway out the window and was pushing at it to get it through when he reached over and cupped her breast and squeezed it, not too hard, and she froze there, still holding on to the backpack,

eyes squinted shut, crying.

He squeezed harder.

"Push it," he said quietly. And the girl did push, and the pack spilled out the window.

He released her.

Through the rearview mirror he watched it tumble, bouncing high behind them, its aluminum frame crumbling, the pack exploding open on the shoulder, her clothes, books, papers—whatever—flying everywhere.

He laughed until the pack was just a tiny speck behind them.

He slowed and pulled over.

He used the button on the armrest to unlock her door.

The girl looked amazed. She hesitated. *Was she actually free?* He wondered if she would retain the presence of mind to read and remember his license plate. He doubted it.

She flung the door open and hurled herself outside.

"Portland welcomes you," he said. "Have a very nice day."

A car whizzed past him. He pulled out onto the highway.

I'm coming, Claire, he thought. It's payback day.

7:50 P.M.

She squatted, sharpening the knife in the twilight gloom just inside the entrance to the cave, a slit in the rock draped with sphagnum moss thirty-five feet above the sea.

Outside gulls cried and high tide pummeled the rocks.

She sharpened the knife with a shard of Carborundum, stolen many years ago and kept in a pouch tied to her belt so it was always near at hand, coarse on one side and fine on the other, grinding the edge in a circular movement, tilting the blade to grind toward the knife point, giving it a feather edge, then pushing the edge straight across the stone, turning it over to push the other side forward too, smoothing away the feather. She did this perfectly and without having to think.

Instead the Woman's thoughts flew over each of them inside like a flock of keen-eyed birds, knowing each crag and crevice of her landscape, detecting the slightest change there. She surveyed her family

and—despite the foolishness of children—did not find them wanting.

She looked at the man sorting through a pile of knives, axes, ax handles, screwdrivers, claw hammers, hatchets and other tools and weapons along the far wall beside their small, nearly smokeless hardwood fire. The man was choosing in an orderly manner, laying out the weapons, knowing what each would do tonight and what he or she would need.

There were guns, too, in the pile—shotguns, rifles, pistols. They had long ago run out of bullets and shells. They kept them anyway.

She watched his hard body move in the rich glow of the fire.

In First Stolen she had chosen well.

She had seen his ghost immediately.

His ghost was strong.

The kitten was on a string. The boy would drag the string into the pounding surf until the kitten screamed and tumbled over itself in the waves and then he would allow the string some slack, let the kitten return to the shoreline for a moment, then

repeat the process until the kitten's eyes were dazed and it no longer cared to scream. The boy did not laugh, did not seem to enjoy the game. Only watched.

Night had only just fallen and he was playing alone by the shoreline.

At her approach he looked up and she knew he was upset to be caught with the kitten that way.

He started to talk. Like all of them he talked too much. Trying to distract her from what he was doing with the kitten. Asking her questions. What was her name. Where did she come from. Saying that he was staying with his parents on the big house on the hill, pointing to it, saying he hated the house and hated his parents, saying to her defiantly that the kitten was his to do with as he liked.

She smiled. She picked up the kitten and walked into the water and held it under.

It had scratched her only a little.

That was eleven years ago, only months after the Night of First Tears, and the wound in her side was still draining despite the poultice she had made from the raw linings of eggshells and her diet of stolen

moldy bread.

The boy was curious about the wound and asked her questions as they walked along the shoreline.

She knew she would have to teach him not to talk so much and not to ask questions. It would not be hard. At fifteen summers, she was his elder by four summers and despite the wound she was stronger than he was and knew that she would always be stronger.

She watched him now select the largest ax and set it aside for himself against the wall of the cave, then return to the pile and tuck a claw hammer into his frayed belt. The hammer and ax were always his weapons of choice.

He was naked to the waist. His man's body had formed strongly. She looked at his body. She remembered teaching him.

At twelve summers he was a father. She had borne his first child, the Girl, on a bed of seaweed at the shoreline. It was night and the moon was full just as it was tonight.

The Woman still was teaching him.

She ran the flat of the sharp blade over her naked

breasts, down across her thighs, and between her legs as she thought of him.

The Girl, their daughter, sat beside him in front of the fire, picking lice from the heads of the twin males who had been born the summer after her. She flicked the lice into the fire.

The lice sizzled, threw thin wisps of smoke.

A ring of clear faceted stone that sparkled in the firelight dangled from a cord around the Girl's neck. A necklace of bones hung lower. There were egret, owl, and gull's feathers tied into her long dark hair.

More than any of them the Girl cared for adornment.

The Girl wore breasts, the skin stretched low and tight and tied around her middle. The breasts had been taken many years ago. They were deep yellow in color and cracked in many places, particularly across the left nipple where the skin had nearly worn through. But the Girl had no breasts of her own yet. She wore them proudly.

She frowned, fussing over the lice in the twin males' hair. The males ignored her, concentrating instead on the greasy bones that were all that

remained of last night's feast.

Their only other child together, the Boy, a male of six summers, played with the Cow deep in the shadows of the cave, tormenting the Cow with a rusted fireplace poker, jabbing it in the ribs. The Cow bucked and strained against its chains.

The Boy was able to see out of his right eye only and held his head at an angle. His left eye had been clouded by a hornet's sting shortly after the Woman bore him and it had never become clear again.

The Boy had been tormenting the Cow for some time now. The Boy was stronger than he thought himself to be. The Cow would be bruised all along its rib cage tomorrow. It bellowed.

It was not unusual for the Boy to play with the Cow in this manner but Second Stolen had perhaps grown tired of hearing it bellow for a while because she walked to the boy and took his poker and whacked him with it once across the bottom. The Boy looked up at her resentfully but did not cry . . . though now he too would have a bruise tomorrow.

He ran to Eartheater and soon they were playing on the floor of the cave, tossing the sun-bleached

bones of a rat in some game they had invented together and which none of the others but the Boy, Eartheater and Rabbit had ever understood.

The Woman did not mind that Second Stolen had disciplined the Boy. The fact that he was her son and not Second Stolen's made no difference to her. To her they all were the same. Her children by First Stolen were the same to her as Rabbit, her son of seven summers by the Cow. And Rabbit was the same as Eartheater—so called because she would eat anything, even handfuls of earth when she was hungry—the daughter of the union between First and Second Stolen. And Eartheater was the same to her as Second Stolen's infant daughter by the Cow, sleeping now in the browse bed made of pine boughs by the fire.

There was no disgrace in having been fathered by the Cow. That was what the Cow was for.

As Second Stolen was using him now.

The Woman smiled. Clearly it had not been the Cow's bellowing that made Second Stolen chase the Boy away—but this.

The Woman had no concept of beauty.

She herself was not beautiful. Not unless power was beauty, because she was powerful, over six feet tall, with long arms and legs, almost simian in their lean strength. But her wide gray eyes were empty when they were not watchful and she was pale from lack of light, filthy as they all were filthy, parasite and insect bitten and smelling of blood like a vulture. A wide smooth scar ran from just below her full right breast to just above her hip where eleven years ago one of the shotgun blasts had peeled her flesh away. Over her left eye and extending an inch beyond her ear, a second blast had left another scar. Neither her eyebrow nor her hair from forehead to the back of her ear had ever grown in again.

She looked as though struck by lightning.

The Woman was not beautiful, and had no concept of beauty. But she recognized a certain delicacy in Second Stolen. A mastery of the Cow that was almost beauty and to her as pleasing.

She watched the familiar ritual.

The Cow whimpered as Second Stolen approached—as he had whimpered nearly every day of the eight full summers they had used him.

Whether the Cow whimpered in anticipation of pain or pleasure the Woman had never known and did not care.

Second Stolen had just bathed. It was the first she had bathed in a very long time, but it was necessary. Both she and the Cow were naked. The Cow was always naked.

His breath was coming faster, his chest heaving.

She watched Second Stolen grip the slack flesh of his belly and twist it for her pleasure, and then reach down.

Second Stolen milked the Cow.

The Cow began to rise.

The Cow was much older than the Woman, yet he could be counted upon to rise quickly—even more quickly than First Stolen, who sometimes allowed himself to become distracted from their need of him. But the Cow had no mind and no distractions. As though the milking were necessary to him.

She watched Second Stolen wrap her legs around

his back, grasp his shoulders and trap him inside her.

In a matter of moments she shuddered. They were finished.

It was good, thought the Woman, that she had taken the moment to use the Cow. Second Stolen's part would be hard tonight. There was pain in it. And Second Stolen had already had pain. She had taken it upon herself when she had failed to find the children the night before and then received it again from the Woman and First Stolen, when they knew what the children had done.

Not even the spoils of the hunt could allow her to forgive what the children had done. Each had received a beating. Second Stolen's most severe because at seventeen summers she was the eldest and had failed to find and stop them.

The infant's ghost haunted her. Even now.

The children had been impatient for her to know them as hunters on their own. The Woman knew how dangerous that was. It had been the reason for her family's destruction eleven summers ago. And somehow last night she had felt another disaster

moving toward them through the clouds, that the children were not just chasing down a rabbit or running after land crabs in the moonlight but were involved in another kind of hunt entirely. A hunt fraught with peril.

She sheathed her knife. She glanced at the still white bag isolated in the far corner of the cave opposite the Cow and felt a sudden chill.

In a sense it had been her fault. She had spoken to them far too often for far too many days and nights about the other child—the one on the hill—and of the power in the blood of children. It had made them impatient. She knew that now.

So they had taken this other child and the mother and the girl.

They had not meant to, but they had done so in the worst possible way.

The child had died *inside* the bag. Because it could not breathe.

No blood had been spilled.

No blood *released*.

And it was release that held the power. To release the blood was to release the ghost and the

power of the ghost. And though the body might struggle, the ghost was always thankful for it.

While this ghost lay in a bag filled only with the body of a child and the child's shit and urine. Angry, trapped inside its body.

The ghost was a danger to them now.

A ghost so young it had barely lived. It would be filled with resentment toward them, filled to bursting.

There was no appeasement possible. The harm was accomplished. It could only be thrust out to sea now, to drift far away from them on the tides.

They would go north again after tonight. The tide would draw the body south.

And tonight they would take power from the other infant. For their journey. To strengthen the Woman and her family.

And tomorrow night they would leave here.

The cave was good, but caves were many.

It was time.

She gestured to First Stolen. He came forward and stood beside her. The others stopped what they were doing and watched, knowing and expectant. Only Rabbit smiled. But then Rabbit was a fool

whose brains had formed no more properly than his brown-pitted teeth.

Rabbit was always smiling.

His ruined teeth made her irritable. She preferred the ones the Girl had fashioned for each of the children, strange and ugly as they were, thin and multicolored, to Rabbit's real ones.

The Woman gestured to Second Stolen and she came forward too, and stood between them. She turned so that she presented her back to them and raised her arms above her head.

Her back, buttocks and thighs were dark with crusted blood and some of the wounds had opened since bathing.

"No," said the Woman. This was not punishment, this was the hunt. It made other demands upon Second Stolen, and though they were alike they were not the same. And Second Stolen knew this. But because the demands of the hunt were more painful, she had been reluctant to face them.

She turned and faced them now.

She raised her arms again, while the Woman and First Stolen each took thin birch switches off the floor

of the cave.

She did not cry out as the switches slashed across her belly, thighs, neck and shoulders—even across her face, though they were careful not to harm the eyes and ears, and careful too of the nipples of her breasts for the sake of the suckling baby. Nor did she try to move away. Yet the Woman saw her pain. It was good to give pain and good to receive pain because that was what life was, and Second Stolen knew the reason for this pain and that it was a good thing, that it had to be.

The children watched, learning.

The Cow rattled his chains.

When it was finished all three were sweating in the humid heat of the cave and Second Stolen stood before them washed with blood as though they had painted her body with the juices of berries—except that the wounds were visible too as was necessary and their switches dripped with blood.

They needed only their weapons now.

She slipped into the torn checkered shirt they had taken from the fisherman long ago; the one she had beheaded with a single perfect stroke of the ax to

show First Stolen how well and swiftly it should be done. The fisherman's knife she wore sheathed in her belt.

The children rose and walked to the pile and in moments they were ready.

PART IV

NIGHT

8:20 P.M.

They walked the beach. Beneath their feet the sand gleamed in the moonlight, studded with stones.

The Woman knew this place.

Not far from them lay the cave where they had lived on the Night of First Tears.

Across the channel, invisible in the dark, was the island where she was born.

She remembered it dimly. She remembered that they had hidden for many days, had finally been driven away by men with guns searching for those other men they had taken for the hunt. The Woman had not known about guns then, though her elders understood the threat and had fled to the mainland.

She remembered that fish were abundant on the island, and birds, and that while true feasts occurred only rarely, the hunting was always safe.

Now that she was elder and leader of her family, the hunting was never safe. Guns were everywhere. Planning was necessary, and caution.

First Stolen liked to pretend that because he was

the eldest male he was leader. But First Stolen had no caution and could not plan. He had never been leader. He could never be. It was only pride and foolishness that made him walk one step ahead of her as he did now, his ax slung across his shoulder. In many ways First Stolen was still a child.

Second Stolen, walking naked beside her, was wiser.

There was a calm about Second Stolen, an acceptance of things. An ability to wait and reason.

It had not always been that way. For the entire cycle of the first moon of her captivity, the Woman had been forced to keep her tied in the dark in a hole at the back of the cave and had beaten her each day because she cried so often for her mother—though, strangely, never for her father—even though she already had six summers by then and should have been stronger.

Over time the crying stopped. And then it was as though she had always been there.

The Woman gazed out to sea. It was high tide now, as it had been the night her family fled the island.

That family was gone, destroyed. And now it was back again.

She had rebuilt them. They were strong.

The children ranged across the beach to either side of her. Rabbit—the best hunter among them despite his stupidity about other things, in the lead—then the twin males, followed by the Girl, Eartheater, the Boy with the clouded eye. Only the infant had been left behind.

She felt the power of them swell and surge inside her.

Her family had been like the seaweed at low tide—Shriveled by the sun, black with ruin, dry almost to the point of breaking. Then the sea rose up again, filling them, turning them green and supple and alive.

The sea was blood.

The night crashed with surf, in her ears a brilliant thunder.

8:45 P.M.

"It's no good," Manetti said. "It's gotten too damn dark. Somebody's just going to wind up busting his skull on these rocks here."

He was right, thought Peters. The search was hampered by high tide now, the beach shrunk to a narrow strip of sand, forcing them back toward the granite cliffs and the erosion spill of rocks beneath, which were already slippery from the spray of surf. The waves filled crevices and tide pools. They were stepping around them, stepping over them. Peters' hair and clothes were damp with spray. He tasted salt on his lips. The men were exhausted.

Enough was enough.

At this angle, having to stand this close to the rock face, they weren't going to find a damn thing anyhow. You couldn't tell what was a cave—never mind how deep a cave, whether it was deep enough to live in—and what was just a fissure or a cleft in the rock.

The troopers had provided them with heavy, three-foot-long Maglite Six-Cells—which went for forty

dollars a pop thank you very much—but their bright beams just slashed straight up the sea-wall, and everything looked pretty much the same as everything else. It was like looking for a nail hole in your bedroom wall with your face pressed up against the baseboard. You just couldn't do it.

"Might as well call it in all across the board," said Peters. "I don't guess anybody's having much more luck than we are."

"Damn!" said Harrison. He'd been scanning the rock face and walking at the same time. He'd stepped into a tide pool, and now his shoe was full of seawater.

In Peters' boyhood they'd called it a soaker.

Manetti took out his radio and made the call. All units proceed to stage-two planning. Effective immediately.

Stage two was house-to-house.

It would take some time to get organized—hell, it would take them a while just to get off the beach—but each unit had its own territory mapped out already all along the coastline. They had orders not to alarm anybody but to alert *everybody*. Stay

indoors, keep telephone and radio lines open, keep doors and windows locked, and call the police to inform them of anything unusual whatsoever.

They'd probably be at it all night.

He'd been up since half past three this morning and by now he was beyond tired, even beyond exhausted, he was into some realm of autopilot wherein half of what he looked at just didn't look right. It was as though he were this close to getting lost all the time, saying to himself, okay, now where the hell am I? Even though he knew this coast like he knew his own front porch.

He kept seeing things move out of the corner of his eye, people-sized things, and when he turned and looked there was nothing there.

It wasn't the booze. That was long gone.

There was a spare bottle left in the glove compartment of his car, half-full, that he kept there for emergencies but the car was home and they were heading for Manetti's cruiser. He wondered if Manetti'd want to make a pit stop. He sort of doubted it.

They were trudging across a strip of sand. It was a

welcome relief from the slick rocks. Harrison and the four troopers were leading now, Manetti and Peters a few feet behind. Manetti looked at him. *Here we go again*, he thought. He knew what he looked like.

"You want to call it a night, George, I'll understand."

"I want like all hell to call it a night. But I don't guess I will just yet. I guess if I slip into a coma you can just leave me in the cruiser."

"What's your guess? You figure they'll stay home tonight, watch television? Or are they out hunting again?"

"I'd say hunting. Why waste a moon like that in front of the TV?"

They walked quietly for a long time.

Then there it was again. A figure moving alongside of him.

The little man who wasn't there.

He needed a second wind right about now and needed it bad.

Peters sighed. "Our territory's the Point, right?"

"Right."

"Listen. That's by my house. Mind dropping me off

a minute? I'd feel a little more comfortable with the .38 around."

Worth a try, he thought.

Manetti just looked at him again. He'd caught his own tone of voice and knew he wasn't fooling anybody. But Manetti wasn't calling him on it. He nodded.

"Sure, George."

It was a big concession, he knew. Cops weren't supposed to drink on duty. Civilians weren't supposed to drink and carry handguns.

Peters wasn't exactly a cop anymore. But at the moment he wasn't exactly a civilian either. He wondered if that meant he was breaking two laws or none. He guessed Manetti had judged it to be none. Or maybe he hadn't wanted to judge it at all.

And how do you judge it? he thought.

He was much too tired. He came up empty.

Miles Harrison found the path. He turned to Peters and smiled.

"We used to come down here as kids," he said. "Light fires on the beach. Neck. Have a beer or two."

"I know," Peters said. "I used to come down here

to arrest you.”

Harrison laughed. “You never did, though.”

“I never wanted to. I just wanted you off the beach. What did you think we came parading down here waving lighted flashlights for?”

“I guess we just figured the cops were pretty dumb.”

“We were. And now you are. All cops are dumb, remember?”

“We always came back a night or two later.”

“And we’d chase you again. I know.”

They were on the uphill path now and Peters’ breath was coming hard, he was puffing.

“I always thought we were just lucky,” Harrison said. “Not to get caught I mean.”

Peters stopped and looked at him, took a breath.

“You were lucky,” he said.

Damn lucky, he thought. *Luckier than you know, given what was out here.* They proceeded up the mountain.

9:15 P.M.

“Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I can’t . . .”

“Get into *bed*, Luke. Now!”

There was always trouble around bedtime and obviously tonight was going to be no exception.

Claire didn't know whether to throw up her hands or throttle him.

The fact that the room was new to him didn't help. He'd scattered his guys—his Turtle guys, his Dick Tracy guys—all over the place playing up here tonight, and now he couldn't find anything.

So he stood there in his pajamas, scowling.

Getting him into *those* had been a major event too. He'd insisted on wearing the same dirty T-shirt he'd been wearing all day, his favorite, the Post Nukes T-shirt he'd picked out for himself in California, a skeleton riding a surfboard against a lurid flaming red sky.

Then there were five full minutes of Did You Brush Your Teeth.

And now he stood there jiggling his legs back and

forth as though he had to go to the bathroom. He didn't. He'd already gone.

It was just bedtime. No matter what time it rolled around it was always too early for him. He was wired to the gills. Half-whiny, half-tyrant.

Eight-year-old boys, she thought. Give me strength.

"I can't help it! I gotta find *Flattop*! I'm not getting into bed until I find him. You can't make me. It's not my fault . . ."

Mouth going a mile a minute. She wondered if he even knew what he was saying when he got like this.

The child from hell.

She normally let him play himself to sleep. Once he got under the covers it didn't take long for him to drift away. The problem was getting him horizontal.

"You can live without Flattop for tonight, Luke. Get into bed."

"No, see, I gotta . . ."

"I'm not going to say it again."

"But I need Flattop!"

"One."

"Mom!"

Close to tears now.

"Two."

Crying. *My god!* she thought. The drama!

"You *hate* me!"

"I do not hate you, Luke. But if I reach the number three and you're not in bed you will not see daylight for a week. Do you understand me? Now what number did I just say?"

"Two."

Just standing there. Pushing it right to the limit.

"All right. Th . . ."

Then flinging himself into bed. She hoped they weren't listening to this downstairs. She hoped they had good bedsprings.

"Three. Thank you very much, Luke. Thank you for making that so very easy."

That sardonic little smile.

He enjoys this, she thought. He's having some kind of weird power-game good time.

While she felt frazzled.

"I love you, Mommy. I hate you, Mommy." He

laughed. "Just kidding."

Claire sighed. She sat down on the bed beside him.

"Listen to me, Luke. I want us to have a nice day tomorrow. I want you to be a good boy just like you were almost all day today, and not give me, or David, or Amy, a hard time. I want you to be cooperative. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"And no more of this like tonight. If we go through this again tomorrow night you're grounded. No television. No playing outside. Clear?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay. Your guys are right here on the floor. Give me a kiss, honey."

He smiled and kissed her. A nice little boy again. The weirdness and wiredness gone.

Jekyll and Hyde, Jr.

She gave him a hug.

"I love you, honey."

"Love you too, Mommy."

She got up and turned out the light. The light in the

hall, though it was dim, would be all he'd need to play by.

"I'll be right next door, okay? And you know where the bathroom is, right?"

"Uh-huh."

She closed the door a little. Not too much.

" 'Night. I love you."

" 'Night."

She heard him scoop his guys off the floor and begin his night's scenario, speaking softly in strange voices behind her.

She walked next door to her room and sat on the bed. The urge to sleep was strong. But David and Amy were downstairs, holding a movie for her on the VCR. They'd watched it halfway through already but Claire barely knew what it was about. It wasn't the movie's fault.

It was waiting for Steven.

Thinking what to say.

Wondering whether she should wake Luke up or not.

That was why she'd wanted him to go to bed so

badly in the first place. This way at least she had control—she had a choice.

She looked at her watch. It was twenty after nine.

It probably wouldn't be long now.

She felt completely unprepared for him.

She already had a headache.

She'd brought some aspirin. They were around here somewhere. It made her aware that she was in a strange room too, just like Luke.

She pictured Luke on the bed. That look. Testing her.

I love you, Mommy. I hate you, Mommy.

Just kidding.

The problem was that he wasn't kidding. Or that he was kidding less than he knew.

Of course he loved her. And of course he hated her, too. From his point of view she had to be at least one-half the reason they weren't a family anymore. And because she was still there and Steven wasn't, hers was the half that grated. He could forget about Steven for long stretches of time. He couldn't forget about her so easily. Day by day she was there to remind him that somehow their

family had failed, and by extension that *he* had failed—to be important enough to link them all together—that he had no power, ultimately, to affect his future. She was the image of his disenfranchisement.

Yet he loved her. Sometimes to both their distractions. She'd read that even kids from solid, happy families focus very strongly on their mothers at his age, demanding much. Constant attention, constant *conversation*, continual approval.

Haunting her.

And at the same time resisting her.

She got up and found the aspirin in the side pocket of her suitcase. She swallowed three of them, wishing they were Advil instead. The aspirin tasted grainy and bitter.

With Luke the anger could surface like a sudden storm.

A few weeks after his birthday he'd wanted her to buy him some new Turtle guy at K-Mart. She was pinching pennies that week just to come up with the grocery money. And he'd just had a birthday after all, with plenty of presents. She said no. So Luke started shrieking about her not loving him and not caring if

he was happy or unhappy, overreacting like crazy, and even after she got him quiet and got herself quiet, it hurt that the thought had even crossed his mind.

It wasn't her doing. It was Steven's. When she was sane, she knew that. She was working hard here, doing her damndest to hold things together.

But it wasn't Luke's fault either. And Luke was suffering.

The way he walked, a little hunched over, looking down at the ground half the time. The much-too-frequent scowl. The urge to be so damned ingratiating even to the creepiest kids at school, the ones who had real problems. Violent problems, some of them.

It all added up to a kid who didn't think much of himself these days.

It added up to a victim.

And we're not much different there, she thought.

Victim.

She'd thought hard on that word.

She'd gone so far as to look it up once, found that it came from the word *weik*, having to do with magic

and casting spells—with wizards and witches—and then to do with tricksters, with guile and cunning.

She remembered smiling at the time. Because in its odd way the older word fit what Steven had done to them as perfectly as the meaning that had evolved from it.

She thought she knew what she would do in regard to Steven.

A boy did not need to be twisted like that. Not even by his father. Lastly by his father.

She didn't need it, either.

She turned off the bedroom light and went down to join David and Amy.

Like normal people, to watch a movie.

In the dim light from the hall Dick Tracy flattened Pruneface with his nightstick and the game was over, even though Pruneface was armed to the teeth with machine gun, pistol, knife and bludgeon, proving once again that the law was the law and bad guys didn't get away with crossing it.

Unless you were Freddy Krueger or somebody.

His mother couldn't stand Freddy Krueger.

She'd yelled at him again tonight. She yelled at him a lot lately.

He supposed that a lot of times he deserved it because he was being bratty and mean to her but it wasn't his fault, sometimes he just had to do something he knew she wouldn't like. He didn't know why he had to. But he did. And then he'd be afraid she wouldn't love him, *couldn't* love him he was such a creep, and even though he guessed he knew she did love him he'd be scared anyway, like somebody was going to take her away too and he wished he had the power to make that not happen but he didn't, there was nothing he or anybody could do about it.

And that would make him mad. So he'd do things to her, say things to her. Mean things. Make believe he was going to punch her or sometimes, even, *really* punch her or be noisy when she was on the telephone or get right up into her face when she was trying to write something or keep on calling her when she was in the shower and could hardly even hear him and had to turn it off all the time.

He did stuff like that a lot. Stuff to annoy her.

He couldn't help it.

I love you. I hate you. He didn't know why he said that. It almost scared him.

He kind of liked this room.

He wasn't aware of liking it or not liking it when he was playing with the guys, but he was now. It was smaller than his room at home and there wasn't much in it. Just a chest of drawers and a table with a chair by it and another small table beside the bed. But he liked the smell. It smelled like wood. Probably because the shop was downstairs under him, or that's what they said.

But it didn't smell perfumy, like his mother's room. It smelled like a guy's room. Like what his father's room probably smelled like.

Who knew?

Who knew anything about his father?

It didn't matter. He was the man now, not his father, and he was lying in a man's room that smelled like wood. When he was older he'd have one just like it. It would be his, but he could invite his mother over. She'd spend a lot of time there, and she'd like being in his room, she'd like the smell. Even if it wasn't perfumy. She'd like it because it

was his.

He rolled over. The crickets were loud outside. He was suddenly very tired. On the table by the bed lay the little pile of bones from the treehouse. He looked at them, eyes growing heavy.

The crickets stopped for a long moment and he listened, feeling a little spooky, wondering why they did that sometimes. It was almost as though his heart stopped too.

Then they started up again.

When he was pretty sure they weren't going to do that a second time, he slept.

9:37 P.M.

They moved silently through the field, washed in moonlight, their bodies the pale color of the tall grass, as though the field itself were rising, moving slowly toward the flickering colored lights inside the house.

When they reached the trees they separated, First Stolen to disable the car and telephone wires, Second Stolen to wait naked and bloody in the shadows by the door that led to the kitchen until the Woman signaled to her that it was begun.

The children climbed up into the trees, climbing swiftly, moving quietly as lizards out across the branches that swayed above the deck. Then they, too, waited, watching the people inside through the sliding glass doors.

The people never moved. They sat in chairs watching the flickering colored lights. The man would speak or one of the women would speak. And that was all.

The Woman waited beneath the house by the stilts

that pegged it to the hillside until First Stolen joined her a few moments later. He nodded, grinning, his work accomplished.

His teeth had recently been sharpened—the Woman had not noticed when.

The ax he carried was strapped at head and handle to a long leather thong. He slipped his arm through and drew it over his head, slinging the ax across his back, preparing to climb the weathered stilts with her to the deck.

First Stolen and the Woman were too heavy for the limbs of trees.

But the climb was easy.

The Woman looked into the trees and saw that the children were ready. She cupped her hands to her mouth and hissed like a cat. At the door that led to the kitchen she heard Second Stolen crying out as though wounded, whimpering, sounding frightened, heard her beat upon the door, and heard from inside the sounds of sudden movement, the people rising, alarmed, going to the door.

Into her trap.

Above her the children moved farther on the

branches, ready to drop.

The Woman and First Stolen began to climb.

9:40 P.M.

Steven finally found the turnoff onto Scrub Point Road the third time he passed it. It was hard as hell reading maps in the dark—he wasn't lying to the hitchhiker about that, he wasn't much good at maps in the first place. All the same he knew he'd overshot it when he wasn't in Dead River anymore, he was in Lubec, and then he turned around and overshot it again and hadn't known he'd screwed up till Trescott.

Anyway, here it was. Puking little sign you could miss in the fucking daylight.

At first the road was macadam but that didn't last long—it turned to dirt in a matter of minutes and he had to go slowly, worrying about how the Mercedes was taking the bumps. There were a lot of bumps.

You paid this much money for a car, you wanted to take care of it.

So it was slow. But Claire wasn't going anywhere. Claire could wait.

He thought about Claire—about screwing Claire,

specifically—and felt the beginnings of a hard-on poke around in his tailored pants.

It had been a while.

It was funny how knowing that she'd divorced him made him want her all of a sudden. He hadn't wanted her much the entire year before she threw him out. Of course part of that was the drinking. You'd drink a little and get a hard-on and want some, and then you'd drink some more and it wasn't worth the trouble. You always paid for screwing your own wife anyway. Long ago he'd decided that. A woman thinks she's loved, needed, she takes advantage. It was better to hang out with the boys at the Plaza bar and pick up a stray now and then.

It wasn't that Claire wasn't desirable. Hell, most of the women he did pick up over the years weren't nearly in her class. But they had the advantage of being easy. You could fuck them and then forget it. While Claire came with all her baggage packed and ready. You fucked her one night, you're expected to take care of the kid the next—while she enrolls in some asshole night school or something. And then it's one night a week, and then two. And pretty soon

your life isn't yours anymore.

Even Marion was easier, and Marion had made demands of her own. He laughed. He still had some of the scars to prove it.

He remembered Claire's goddamn body, though. A sleek, long-limbed body.

The woman was a racehorse. Tits and ass exactly the right size—even after Luke was born—and skin so smooth and soft you could just curl up and die.

She wouldn't want to fuck him at first, he knew. She was probably still mad at him. That was all right. She'd come around. She always had. And if she didn't come around he'd fuck her anyway.

Screw the restraining order. What was she going to do? *Call the police on Luke's dad?*

It might even be better if she resisted. He pictured pinning her to the bed, ripping off her clothes, holding her wrists down and sticking it to her. She was strong but he was a whole lot stronger, six foot two and not flabby—the handball sawto that—and he out-weighed the bitch by a hundred pounds.

He could use his teeth on her.

Claire had never liked biting.

His hard-on was serious now and he wondered if he shouldn't have fucked the hitchhiker after all as he cruised the narrow dirt road, his shocks taking a beating, his high-beams on, looking for the house that lay somewhere ahead of him in the gray shades of night.

9:41 P.M.

David was the first one out of his chair but Amy was right behind him, going to the door, the sound of someone in terrible trouble out there—a woman's voice, scared, hurting—and he'd already reached the door and was pulling it open before she remembered that just hours ago the sheriff's office had warned them to hold anyone off at gunpoint if they had to, not just Steven but anybody who was new to them, but by then it was too late, because the shock of the girl's condition wiped away every impulse but the one to help her and get help fast.

She was just a teenage girl.

The door opened and she collapsed across the threshold—or would have if David hadn't grabbed her and held on. Together they helped her inside.

You hardly knew where to touch her.

She looked as though she'd been horsewhipped, beaten for days.

Some of her wounds were scabbing but many more were fresh and deep.

She felt a sudden fear at who or what lay out there in the dark beyond that open door.

She was immediately aware of Claire beside her.

"Claire. The door," she said.

Claire closed it, locked it. "I'll phone the police," she said.

"The number's on a card over the telephone."

"Jesus," said David. He was easing her into a chair.

There were marks on her breasts, her tender inner thighs—everywhere.

"You're all right now," Amy said. "I'll get a blanket for you and a pan and some water and we'll clean you up, all right?"

The girl nodded, gasping for breath as though she'd been running a long way for a long time and couldn't speak.

Amy passed Claire in the kitchen, dialing, reading the card. She hurried past the staircase to her bedroom and pulled the blanket off the foot of the bed.

She checked Melissa in her crib. *Sleeping*. She returned to the study.

“Can you talk? Can you tell me what happened?” David was kneeling, asking her.

The girl just shook her head. She looked like she was about to cry.

“I can’t get them,” said Claire. Then suddenly her eyes went wide.

“My god,” she said. “There’s no dial tone.”

Amy looked from Claire to David. Their eyes met and she knew he was frightened too as the girl leaned forward, her pale arms rising. *Embracing him.*

Like ripe fruit the children dropped silently from the trees around them as the Woman and First Stolen pulled themselves over the rail to the deck and moved toward the sliding glass doors, watching the people inside—all their attention focused on Second Stolen huddled trembling in the chair and none on the doors, even as the Woman reached out to touch the cool smooth panel of glass and then its metal edge, the door hissing like a blacksnake as she slid it open.

“Mom?”

Luke stood at the top of the stairs, looking somehow thinner and more vulnerable in his pajamas than she'd seen him in years, and Claire suddenly thought, *There's a baby in this house*, though she didn't know why she should think that. She cradled the receiver that she was still holding for some reason and took one step toward him up the stairs, because he had started down.

She didn't want that. She felt some deep insistent knowledge that told her to keep him right where he was.

She heard Amy gasp and David's startled cry, and Luke did too—the sounds stopped him openmouthed on the stairs, and Claire's first thought was for Luke and her second was for the baby who had tugged on her finger this afternoon. She ran to Amy's bedroom and scooped her up, the baby instantly awake, startled and staring up at her, while behind her Amy screamed and things were bumping, breaking, falling, some stop-time wind of destruction swirling at her heels as she ran to Luke and shoved him in his room.

Second Stolen reached for the man and drew herself up, her breasts pressed flat against him. She almost laughed. The man did not know what to do with his hands. They fluttered over her back like frightened birds.

The man was afraid of hurting her. He did not know what to make of her embrace.

She listened for the door, heard it slide open and knew the others were inside.

She felt a wild communion with them compounded of blood and hate, not knowing that in part the hatred was for them—for the whippings, for First Stolen's use of her, for a life stolen which she could never truly miss but which lingered dimly still somewhere far beyond her waking consciousness—and not caring, because this was life now, this hunger, this blood beating in the veins of the man who held her.

She felt rather than saw them enter the room and then heard the man's woman gasp.

She was staring at the sliding doors. At them. At her people.

She pulled him tight to her. And bit down.

At the very last moment the man resisted, pulled away, and instead of the soft flesh of his neck her teeth found only bone but that was all right too, she knew she would have him anyway and bit down harder, grinding her teeth into the collarbone, working her way *into* him, her eyeteeth sinking into the back of the bone, tasting the salt drool of blood and swallowing as he screamed and took her head in his hands, trying to push her, shake her away.

But the man was soft. Not strong.

Her teeth hooked the back of the bone. She pulled.

At the same time she let go, using his weight.

There was a sound like a tree limb snapping as the man fell to the floor, screaming and clutching the splintered halves of bone pressed together pale and bloody glistening wet outside his body.

Second Stolen looked up and saw Eartheater and Rabbit beside her. The others were busy with the woman.

All except First Stolen, who was turning the corner toward the stairs, going for the child. His ax in one hand, claw hammer in the other.

Earth eater and Rabbit were looking at her, waiting. Rabbit was grinning.

She heard the man's woman shriek.

"Mine," she said and bent down over him.

He saw a glimpse of her upside down from the floor, of Amy, his wife, his partner, the flesh he knew so well that it was almost *his* flesh though his own real flesh was screaming now, burning, throbbing so that each new heartbeat was something to live through, to stay conscious through, to get beyond and by, Amy being hauled back into the kitchen by three filthy boys in rags and a ratty-haired girl in some sort of cracked, pale yellow (*impossible*)

skin. Amy struggling, screaming, while the woman (their mother? a family? *No.*) *while the woman followed, pointed to the sink with a hunting knife. And the others dragged her forward.*

He saw this and in that instant tried to feel his way into Amy's mind, to reach into her and pour out strength and hope to her even though he himself had no strength, the pain had drained it, but to reach out and somehow protect her, armor her with the huge

grateful armor of his love. He felt for her, but she wasn't there. She was alone, cut off from him by some terrible black wall of fear.

In the moment before the bright new pain burst like suns before his eyes, he had never felt so lonely.

Amy was in the computer.

The nightmare images played themselves over even as they continued. She was inside the moment and somewhere behind it at the same time, exactly like viewing split screen on the computer, eyes darting back and forth between the old text and the new.

In either place, what she saw was insane.

The girl reaching up to embrace him, something new and cunning on her face as suddenly there was somebody in the room, seeing them there coming through the door, children, a woman with a checked shirt and a man carrying an ax, the children carrying knives and hatchets and hammers and one of them, the smallest girl, what looked like a garden trowel and they were on her now, two twin boys at her right arm, a boy and girl at her left,

dragging her back to the kitchen sink, strong, so that she struggled hard and kicked but they dragged her anyway, they pulled her away from David bleeding on the carpet next to his desk *and the girl had bitten him, torn him, she saw the bone crack sharp and bloody up through the skin.*

Pulling her away from him, out of David's sight lines. So she could not see what they were doing to him anymore and—

Melissa! Where was Melissa? Where were Claire and Luke and Melissa and . . . the man with the ax!

The woman was scarred, horribly scarred, taller than any woman she had ever known. She was the first one she had seen coming at her holding the knife now while she felt the rim of the sink slam hard against her back, aware that her robe was open and she was exposed to them except for the bra and panties, and then there were cords in the woman's hand, leather cords and she was tying them to her wrists, a grim almost solemn look on her face, tying them too tight, cutting deep, hurting her, the children letting go, the woman turning her around so that the rim of the sink dug into her belly and pulling back the

cords first left then right and tying them to the hot and cold taps on the sink while the children jerked her legs out from under her, jamming the edge of sink into her ribs below her breasts so that her ribs and bound wrists supported her weight, not her legs, they were spreading her legs and tying them to the legs of the kitchen table behind her and she screamed and screamed, twisting, jerking at the cords, and suddenly there was a rag in her mouth and duct tape shoved roughly over her lips and she couldn't scream, she could hardly even breathe.

She heard pounding from upstairs and knew suddenly where the man with the ax had gone and began to cry. Melissa. Her baby. Claire. Her friend *Claire holding her, Amy sobbing over Danny, her first real boyfriend, in the freshmen dorm in college, her arm soft and strong around her as she sobbed as though her heart would break* and David.

Oh god David.

Don't cry, she thought. You'll suffocate if you do. You'll die.

She heard his tortured scream and then more pounding upstairs and a crash of something falling.

The girl was wearing a skin, she had seen that too right away and now she saw what it was.

The skin was human.

She saw the cracked yellow breasts, the darker nipples. As the girl smiled down at her with filthy yellow teeth and placed Amy's bright new aluminum lobster pot in the sink below her, and then adjusted it.

Right beneath her neck.

Even as Claire locked the door behind her she knew it wouldn't hold. She heard David scream, Amy saying no no no and sobbing.

Melissa was crying.

Leading them straight to this room.

Luke stood silent, his face colorless, looking at her. Reading her fear. *What's happening? What do we do?*

"Hold Melissa," she said and thrust her into his arms. The baby stopped crying for a moment and then began again.

She tried not to hear the sounds downstairs.

She tried not to hear or think of Amy.

She went to the window, threw it open and looked down. The bound pile of framing lumber was just below, maybe three feet high by four feet wide. From the window to the pile looked to be a drop of ten feet. Maybe twelve.

She could think of nothing to do but try.

“Mommy . . . ?”

She put her finger to her lips.

She listened. Someone was on the stairs now. Taking his time.

“Luke,” she whispered. “There are people in this house. They want to hurt us, and Melissa. We have to go out the window. We have to hide.”

He glanced at the window and he was beginning to cry, trying hard to hold it in. The crying was the real thing now.

“Mommy? I’m . . .”

“I know you’re scared. It’s okay to be scared. But we have to be brave and I’ll help you. Don’t worry. Put Melissa on the bed and climb up here on the dresser.”

She heard the footsteps again. At the top of the stairs.

Close now.

Luke did as he was told. So gentle with the baby she felt a sudden pang of love for him so powerful it hurt.

“Okay, now hang your legs out the window. Sit on the windowsill and give me your arms.”

Tears were rolling down his cheeks but he trusted her, he did as she asked and she took his wrists and leaned over the dresser and started to lower him down.

“Mom!” She could hear the panic.

And the footsteps in the hall now.

“I’m going to hold you until you’re all the way out the window, do you understand? Then I’m going to let go and it won’t be that far because there’s a big pile of wood down there and you’ll fall on that. You’ll be fine. Be a big boy now. When you fall, try to remember to bend your legs a little, okay?”

Luke nodded. His wrists were cold and sweaty.

She reached out across the dresser until her feet were off the floor, her weight sufficient to balance them, inched out farther until she could see over the rim of the windowsill to the pile below and until his

legs stopped swaying.

Could she do this? Could he? Could she possibly let him go? For a boy—and not an especially athletic boy—ten feet was a terribly long way down.

She saw him, neck broken, sprawled across the pile.

For a moment she wanted desperately to haul him back in again, bring him back through the window and hold him close and hug him until this all went away and they were together again alone and there was no night and not even Steven to harm them.

Melissa was silent.

Downstairs Amy screamed.

Someone was trying the door.

You have to, she thought.

“Bend your knees, Luke,” she said, sounding calmer than she had imagined she could possibly sound, so calm it shocked her. *For him*. “I love you and I’ll be right behind you. On three, okay? One. Two.”

She felt his hands grip her wrists hard once and then relax again.

“Three!”

She willed her fingers open and felt him drop away, and even as the ax splintered the door behind her, watched him plummet down with sudden sickening speed and hit and roll, nearly off the pile but not quite, not quite thank god, just G.I. Joe getting shot again, and then joyfully saw him stand.

She turned for Melissa and this time saw as well as heard the ax come through the door, prying the wood apart enough so that she caught a glimpse of him, a big man naked to the waist and covered with what looked like a layer of grease, grinning, teeth like tiny blackened points, like fangs.

She tore Luke's comforter off the bed and wrapped it around Amy's baby as the ax came through again, the man laughing, watching her through the slit in the door and then suddenly realizing what she was going to do, getting the idea now as she pulled herself up on the dresser and over to the windowsill.

He slashed furiously at the door, stroke after stroke thunder and lightning crackling in her ears as she steadied herself against the upper frame with

one hand and clutched Melissa close and pushed off, her back scraping over the frame.

She felt bright quick fire along her spine that was instantly absorbed by the sense of falling, an explosion of absolute freedom so stark and terrifying that her free hand clawed for control, her arm seeking balance as though she were falling through water, not air, and then just as suddenly instinctively returning to Melissa, holding her tight as the impact jolted them and she was on her back, knowing she had got it wrong somehow, and starbursts and night descended upon her all at once along with the scent of spruce and the still, warm air.

David lay numbed with shock staring at the blank computer screen on the desk overhead.

A phrase he recognized—he didn't know from where—kept loping around in his head.

The woods are dark. Are dark.

He was aware of voices on the television and then of someone kicking it in, the smell of acrid electrical smoke almost familiar enough to evoke the memory of who he was and where—and who this surgeon

was who operated on him now with naked bloody breasts in his anesthetic dream.

He did not remember her opening his shirt but she must have, to get at what was wrong with him, because now she was tracing a thin red line with her scalpel from his collarbone down across his sternum to his stomach, a thin sound of tearing as she tugged the flesh apart.

The anesthetic was amazing. His eyes flickered down and he could see his own organs beneath the film of welling blood, his lungs, his heart, and below them his diaphragm, stomach, liver.

Yet there was no pain.

He felt only an itch around his collarbone and a strange cold feeling, like drinking crushed ice in a tall summer drink—so cold you could feel it all the way down inside you.

And it must have been a heart problem, a transplant, because he saw his surgeon reach in slowly and pull the heart free, the heart still beating firmly . . . and in his dream he saw the impossible, saw her raise it to her lips and bite down while her two assistants reached into him too, scrambling with

dirty fingers for his liver.

In his anesthetic nightmare he saw her chewing.

His eyes went back to the computer screen—an empty blank—but it wasn't a computer screen now, it was a heart monitor. So incredibly still and lifeless that he knew that he was dead.

“Mommy! Wake up! Mommy!”

Luke was shaking her. She still held Amy's baby.

She'd hit the pile and fallen against the side of the house, hitting her head, and she could not have been dazed for more than a moment because there was Melissa still held tightly in her arms.

She looked up at the window and saw exactly what she had been afraid to see. The man staring down at them. Then suddenly gone.

She got off the pile, grabbed Luke by the arm and started running through the grass.

“I know a place!” he said.

Melissa was crying loudly. There wasn't a thing she could do.

“Show me,” she said.

The Girl had her knife to the mother of the infant's throat and was going to cut when First Stolen raced downstairs, running for the double glass doors. The Woman stopped him. A questioning, angry look on her face.

He has failed, thought the Girl. First Stolen has failed!

It pleased her.

He pointed toward the doors.

"The child . . . a woman, a boy!"

First Stolen was angry too, and confused. Gesturing wildly with the hammer.

The Woman had not told them there would be any boy, nor any woman other than the one she held here by her curly red hair. Their presence had taken her by surprise.

And that pleased the Girl too. That the Woman could be wrong.

The Woman made a single gesture that encompassed them all—even Second Stolen, Rabbit and Eartheater who were feeding on the kill on the floor.

Go! Follow.

The Girl sheathed her knife and First Stolen was halfway through the doors—then he froze there like a deer paused in flight at the sudden bright lights that swept through the kitchen window, bathing the Girl and the captive woman in light, passing over them and pouring through the rear window to the other room, and they knew that they were no longer alone.

Found it, goddammit! Steven thought as he turned left off Scrub Point Road onto the even narrower dirt road where the mailbox said *Halbard*. He'd been going uphill for a while and now he'd reached the top and was going down over a gentle rise. He could see the house a few hundred yards ahead, lights burning, Claire's and another car in front. He pulled in behind Claire and set the parking brake against the incline.

He turned off the ignition and then the headlights.

The door opened and all he could see was a form in silhouette, followed by other, smaller silhouettes.

His reception committee, coming out to meet him.

What was this, a goddamn cocktail party?

Because they just *kept coming*.

They were moving around the other parked car toward the Mercedes but moving too fast, much too urgently for his liking, approaching him from both sides . . . and it occurred to him that maybe he was actually in some kind of trouble here, that maybe Claire had hired a few thugs to keep him the hell away from her and Luke. It wasn't like her but with a woman you could never know.

It didn't fit though because if these were thugs then half the bastards were midgets. He couldn't put it together. But he didn't like the feel of it either one goddamn bit.

He flicked the lock switch on the panel just in case. Then he turned on the headlights again. In time to see the last one running out the door.

Carrying an ax.

And he wasn't any goddamn midget, either.

He reached for the ignition. He doubted he'd ever really been scared in his life, not even seeing Marion's body lying lifeless on the bed, seeing what he'd done to her and wondering what to do next, but he was scared now, adrenaline ripping through him like the Amtrak train to Washington, sphincter

twitching dangerously. The Mercedes roared to life and he was set to put her into reverse when he remembered the emergency brake and reached down.

He saw the woman—jesus! she was taller than he was!—reach for the ax and the man hand it over to her at the same time that he felt somebody else climb up on the trunk, the car rocking with the weight, and suddenly there were two explosions front and back that were almost simultaneous, and powdered, slivered glass everywhere, in his hair and on his face and all the hell over him.

He grabbed for the gearshift. Through the glinting white webbing that was all that was left of his windshield he saw the figure of the woman raise the ax again and bring it down with the same terrific force a second time and as he threw it into reverse the windshield collapsed in on him completely. He screamed, hitting the gas so hard that the car shot backward, jolting him, rear bumper grinding against the rocky dirt incline, and the boy—he saw it was a boy now, *some* kind of boy—tumbled off the trunk beside him.

Through the completely open windshield he could see the woman, the man and all the rest of them running, coming at him and he just kept shooting backward, hoping to hell there weren't any trees behind him because he couldn't remember and couldn't see a thing through the cracked rear window and couldn't take his eyes off them anyway, these *people* half-naked most of them—women with breasts bobbing as they ran and the boy who was on the trunk getting up with his dick erect, loving this, not a stitch of clothing and not hurt at all like some indestructible ghost or animal and running too. He just kept going, fuck the Mercedes, scraping over rocks, engine whining, realizing he'd been screaming all this time and was still screaming until finally he saw the headlights sweep the crossing onto Scrub Point Road.

He hit the brake, with most of them, the ones he could see, a hundred yards away and not giving up, not by a long shot, coming on fast. He threw the car into drive and felt her skid and tried to straighten her as the man tore out in front of his headlights, throwing something and diving, tumbling over the hood of his car at the same time and disappearing,

and he felt the sudden jarring impact against his forehead over his left eye, the heavy claw hammer slashing past him and into the cracked rear window, lodging there headfirst, its handle pointing back to him like an accusatory finger.

The dizziness was worse than any drunk he'd ever been on in his life and he barely missed a stand of white birch that seemed to appear out of nowhere, swerving around them by inches, the palms of his hands bleeding and dusted with glass, sticky where they clutched the wheel.

He felt sick, his stomach rolling.

He felt consciousness bleed away from him through his fingers, sliding down off his forehead and he fought it like he'd never fought before—harder even than Marion had fought *him*—because they were still behind him, not yet far behind him. And the damned black night loomed all around.

10:05 P.M.

They clocked the Mercedes at just under seventy, and though nobody exactly wanted to be bothered with a speeding ticket just then, there were enough hairpin turns along Route 6 so that it was either that or watch this joker kill himself somewhere on up ahead. Plus the car was all over the place, careening around like a wounded buzzard. Plus there was that cracked rear window.

When they got to the flatlands past the closed dark mini-mall where Harmon's General Store used to be, Harrison put on the flasher and siren and they pulled him over.

He stopped so fast they nearly rear-ended him.

Then he got out of the car.

Peters felt his innards freeze when he did that. Because this was how cops got shot all the time, sitting ducks inside their squad cars while somebody blasted away at them through the windshield. Reflexively he hunkered down in the backseat and hoisted the .38. While Harrison and

Manetti threw open their doors, got out of the car and drew on him, using the doors as protection. Which was what Peters would have done too if he hadn't been too old and slow and fat.

"Hold it right there!" said Manetti, and unless you could see the twitch in his cheek you wouldn't have known he was scared to hell and back.

"Turn around and place both your hands flat on the roof of your car. Now! Move!"

The guy just stared at them.

And for a moment it got pretty tense there.

Manetti repeated his instructions.

The guy looked bewildered for a second or two and then turned and did what Manetti told him.

Everybody breathed again.

Peters got out of the car. Manetti and Miles Harrison were already walking toward him.

The guy had on a very nice suit but he looked like hell, blood off his forehead wet on the side of his face and staining the expensive shirt. There was some kind of powder all over him, and as soon as Peters got close to him he could see the blood on his hands as well.

Blood on the hands was not the kind of thing you expected from a speeding ticket.

Generally speaking, it was not a good thing.

Manetti held his gun squarely on the man while Harrison patted him down.

They could see what the powder was. The Mercedes had no windshield left at all to speak of.

"You want to tell me what happened here, sir?" Manetti asked. But the guy was babbling. Total ragtime.

It was a moment or two before they could figure out what he was babbling *about*, but when they did they got very interested in the guy indeed.

Peters had picked up the spare pint bottle back at the house but he hadn't touched it yet, and now he was sort of glad he hadn't.

"Hold on," Manetti was saying. "You're talking about kids here? Kids and . . . what? A woman?"

"*Some* kind of fucking woman! She took out the whole fucking window!" He pointed to the windshield. "I'm telling you, there was some guy with a fucking ax and . . . god knows how many of them. They were all *over* me! I swear to god half of them were running

around naked and they—”

“And you were there for what reason, sir?”

“To see my wife.”

“Your wife was there? You can turn around now, sir. It’s okay. It’s all right.”

The guy turned. White as a sheet.

“I didn’t see her,” he said. “I dunno. I never even got out of the car.”

“She lives there?” asked Peters.

“She was visiting . . . people.”

“Who? What people?”

“Amy and David . . . what the . . . what the fuck’s David’s last name! . . . Jesus christ, I can’t . . . I mean, I’ve known them for . . . since . . .”

Talk about jumpy. Like somebody had shoved a jalapeño up his ass.

“Take it easy, sir,” said Manetti. “How’d the blood get on your hands?”

“Glass! I’ve got glass all the hell over me. They took out the fucking window on me! Look at that!”

He spread his hands. There weren’t any deep cuts that Peters could see so it must have been mostly

powder. It would take some cleaning up. But there were other things that needed to get done first.

The people in that house were in a world of grief.

“Can you remember the name now, sir?”

“Sure. Sure I can. David and Amy . . . Jesus . . . shit! *Shit!*”

“What’s your name, sir? Your own name.”

“Steven. Steven Carey.”

And can you remember *their* name now?”

“I . . .”

Peters didn't like this. The guy was getting that glazed look in his eyes.

“All right. Can you take us there? Do you remember what road?”

“I . . . I . . .”

“It was back this way, right?” Manetti pointed back the way they’d come.

“Yeah. Little dirt road. I can find it I think. But I . . . I don’t want to . . . go back there. You know?”

He was almost crying.

“Sir,” said Manetti, “your wife and friends might be in a lot of trouble right now. A lot of trouble.”

"Yeah," said the man.

"Kid, too."

"You've got a child there?"

"Yeah. Son. L-Luke."

"I think you should try to take us there, sir. For your wife's and your son's sake."

"Unh-unh."

"I think you should."

"Shit. I'm telling you. I'm telling you. I don't want to go back there. You don't know the kind of . . . bullshit . . . I don't *want* . . ."

The guy was shaking so hard Peters was afraid his knees would give way right then and there. He'd seen people go into shock over a whole lot less. This guy was getting close.

He stepped forward.

"Easy, sir," he said. "Hey. Look. Look at me."

The guy looked. Peters showed him his .38. He talked to him softly, calmly.

"We're all armed. You see? You understand? Plus, we're calling this in immediately, right away. We'll have police in the area before you know it. Nobody's

going to hurt you. We'll make absolutely sure of that. We're police and that's what we're for. Okay?"

The guy didn't look too comforted.

"Listen. Did you see any guns? Shotguns? Rifles? Pistols?"

"No."

"Anything like that?"

"No."

"There. You see what I mean?"

"I saw knives. I saw axes. . . ."

"But no guns, right?"

The guy nodded.

"Then you see what I mean? You're safe."

He was wavering.

"Come on, sir. Get in the car. Show us where the road is and we'll go find your son. Come on. We'll get some bandages for those hands too, and for your head, all right? We've got a first-aid kit right here in the car. Okay?"

"I . . ."

"Okay. Good. Come with me."

The guy was definitely hovering close to shock. If

he slipped into it all the way they'd never find the place. They'd damn well better hurry. For all Peters knew it might already be too late for these people.

He took the man by the arm and led him to the squad car. He was moving like a sleepwalker.

"In here, sir," Peters said and opened the door. The man got inside. Peters got in next to him.

Harrison and Manetti were set to go.

Peters looked at the man sitting next to him, big and tall and scared.

I hear you, he thought.

They hit the siren and swung the car around, going back.

10:10 P.M.

The naked girl led Amy like a reluctant dog, tugging at the leather thongs that bound her wrists when she hesitated in the darkness.

The path was narrow. Above them was a low natural arbor, a thick canopy. There was little light. It was like walking through a tunnel, a long black twisting tube that shape-shifted under the occasional shafts of moonlight.

Everything was frightening.

A branch brushing her cheek. Another tugging at her robe.

The rush of startled wings in the brush ahead.

Something soft, slippery—the feel of decay under her scraped and bruised bare feet.

The smell of death drifting off their bodies.

They had gone through the field and they were climbing now, a slight incline. Her legs felt unequal to the task. The night was warm but she was shivering, the breeze through her open robe prickling her skin, almost a torture to her.

They moved on and the canopy opened up above them, flooding them with moonlight. They were in a small clearing near the woods. Just ahead the hill became steeper and she could see the black shapes of taller trees outlined against the sky.

She saw her captors too. It was almost worse being able to see them. The dark was almost better.

The naked teenage girl. The two twin boys who ran ahead of her as though this were a game, a pleasure.

What are they going to do to me? she thought. With each step she walked the question seemed to recur afresh, pounding at her like a drumbeat, like a migraine.

What are they going to do?

There was only one other question now and that was for Melissa, and somehow it was impossible to ask herself that without becoming hopelessly scrambled. Melissa was with Claire. Melissa was *not* with Claire. They had found Melissa but not Claire. They had found Claire and Luke only—not Melissa. Any of these but the first, too terrible to contemplate.

Besides, that question could only rarely get through. The pounding continued, the awestruck selfish self screaming for help, searching for a way out.

What are they going to do? *To me.*

Before, as they crossed the field of grass from the house, she had allowed herself—only once—to turn around and look behind her. The tall woman was gone. So was the man, and one or two of the children. She did not know where they had gone and could not even speculate where because of what she did see.

An incredibly dirty boy with a clouded eye.

And the girl with the skin.

The boy carried a pair of arms severed below the shoulder blades. He carried them like firewood.

David's arms.

His wedding ring and wristwatch.

The girl with the skin and the feathers in her hair and the diamond ring that swung back and forth from around her neck carried his legs.

Holding on to his feet. One leg slung over each shoulder.

Ahead of her, the naked teenage girl carried the yellow plastic mop bucket Amy kept in the cabinet beneath the sink. She could not see its contents.

She would not imagine them.

She had almost slipped away just then, she could feel the warm invitation of the cocoon that meant to surround her and protect her, she could feel it sliding gently over her mind—beginning there, sensibly enough, before going on to the rest of her.

But the question had come too, just as automatically, just as unbidden—*What about me? What are they going to do? And what can I do?* They were all one question, and somehow from that time to this the question had come into conflict with the cocoon and defeated it, tearing it away from her until no filament was left at all.

She felt rage so deep in her blood for what they had done to David she barely knew it was there—it was part of her now—and a terrible fear, but mostly she felt the pounding, driving question.

Her mind was clear. Her body knew each moment that she lived through. Saw, heard, smelled everything.

Crickets, pine, the pinprick stars.

She was glad of the clarity, even glad of the hurtful breeze across her legs. It gave the legs awareness. And strength.

Whether it was a good thing or not, whether it would help her survive, did not occur to her. She was her body now.

Her body and her question.

"It's this way, Mom . . . I think. I'm pretty sure."

He knew how uncertain he sounded.

He couldn't help it. It all looked so different at night, even with the moon. And besides, they were running from somebody. He was frightened—and frightened got him confused. And confused got him so mad at himself that he wanted to cry.

But she didn't get exasperated or scold him or anything. She was patient, following right behind.

"It's all right, Luke," she said. "Just keep looking. We'll find it."

He wasn't even sure that the treehouse was a good idea but she seemed to think so—that it might be at least—and that pleased him. There was even

some excitement mixed with the frightened feeling because it was like he was the man now, doing things that she was trusting him to do. Doing *something*.

They'd come through the brush and he'd got lucky coming up this time, avoiding most of the stickers, and the only time she'd scolded him was when he stepped on one and hollered and she told him to be quiet—and then, more calmly, said he had to be quiet because they didn't know where the people were or how far back. There was something in her voice. Something so serious it sort of got to him. So that even if he hadn't realized that she was barefoot too with just her thin dress on, no more dressed than he was in his pajamas, he wouldn't have cried out after that for anything.

Though he wanted to. The stickers hurt.

But now there were only mosses and pine needles underfoot. They were coming up over the top of the hill where he thought he'd stood that afternoon and saw the treehouse. He was pretty sure. The treehouse should have been just up top of the next hill. But he stood and looked in every direction and

then he looked again and he couldn't see it. No dark platform anywhere. He couldn't see it and he kept hearing monsters creeping up over the hill behind him.

"Up here?" she whispered. "Where?"

Melissa made a gurgling sound. What if they heard her? What if he'd gone over three hills today instead of just two? *What if he was all screwed up?* He wanted to cry again.

"Somewhere . . ." He ~~was~~ starting to cry. No!

What if he'd come up over the other side?

There had been a clearing below to his . . . left . . . just past the tall grass by the house and the scrubby woods.

He looked down to his left. He had a clear view. In the moonlight he could see, and there was nothing like a clearing down there. Nor directly below, either.

But there! There it was! To his *right!* He'd made a sort of half circle, because they were running and it was dark. So instead of coming straight up he'd circled right—and that was why there weren't so many sticker bushes up that way.

"Over here!" he said.

He ran across the top of the hill and saw it outlined against the sky, higher up somehow than he remembered it—but maybe that was the dark too. The dark was tricky.

“See it?” He pointed. “Come on. Over here!”

“Careful!” she whispered.

But he was already racing down the hill and then up, he could see well enough, and he jumped the stickers and got to the base of the tree and waited for her there, triumphant.

People never look up, Claire thought. That's what they say. If you want to hide something, hide it up.

She was betting their lives on a piece of folk wisdom.

But the car keys were in her pocketbook on the kitchen table. There was no getting out of there. There was only hiding.

This is better, anyway, she thought, than stumbling through the woods at night with an eight-year-old boy and a baby. She'd have tried the road but they'd have been visible for a quarter of a mile on the road in the moonlight and they'd have had to go

around the house in order to get there.

They were in the house, and she wasn't going near it again unless she had to.

The treehouse seemed their best hope.

It had the advantage that you could see the house lights below, over the hills and through the trees. It was far away but you could see them. If anybody came along, any cars, they'd know that and then they could come down again.

She was praying for that, and not without reason. Running across the field through the grass she'd seen a car pull in. She'd stopped Luke for a moment in the middle of the field, thinking that this was a rescue. Thinking it almost *had* to be.

Then she heard the car screech down the road again.

Steven? Maybe. He was due.

Whoever it was he had gotten away from them, she was almost certain of that, the car had whined off into the distance, and she could only think that the first thing anyone would do would be to get to the police and get there fast to report this.

"Lie down," she whispered. "Lie right here in the

center. I think the platform's wide enough so that nobody can see us from down below. Try not to move much."

Luke did as she asked.

Holding Melissa, who had finally fallen back to sleep again—the night was warm and comfortable, thank god—Claire did the same.

She stared up, blocking out the sounds and pictures that raged through her memory.

Even now, even on this night, the stars were a comfort to her. If she tried—and she *did* try—she could picture children lying out here on truly peaceful nights, away from the adult world, imagining.

She wondered what Luke was thinking, what he was seeing in the stars.

Amy had said that a doctor and his wife had owned the house before them and that they'd had at least two children. The doctor's wife had been living with one of them since her husband died. So the treehouse probably belonged to them. Claire's age now, or older.

She thought of Amy. Heard her screams. She pushed at the sound. Pushed it away.

If worse came to worse they could stay up here till morning, then head out to the road. If the house looked quiet.

Completely quiet.

We're all right, she thought. *We'll be fine*.

The only problem, the only reason her hands wouldn't quite stop shaking was that she felt so isolated here. They *were* so isolated.

Almost . . . trapped.

There was only one way down.

She remembered something and felt a sudden chill.

When she was a girl she had an uncle who owned a dairy farm in upstate New York. Her uncle was a big thick brawny man, well over six feet tall. He had a cruel streak when it came to children and a nasty sense of humor. He was the kind of man who, if you were a girl, would hug you and rub your cheek with his two-day growth of beard until you cried, or if you were a boy he'd want to shake hands with you so he could squeeze your knuckles together, to the same effect.

Claire was nine or ten and her brother Adam

about twelve when her uncle proposed a coon hunt one night. Her father was a city boy, bred in Boston. He had never hunted coon and he agreed. Girls, of course, were excluded. But Adam could go.

He'd said later that it sounded exciting—running through the dark woods after a pack of dogs baying in the distance. And it ~~was~~ exciting, he said. Right up to the time the dogs treed the coon and his uncle handed him the .22 rifle and said shoot.

Her brother was a good shot. He had a .22 of his own and practiced at the local rifle range. He looked at the coon about fifteen feet away huddled terrified and exhausted like a big ball of fur stuck immobile where the limb of the tree met the tree trunk—an easy shot for somebody not half as good as Adam was—while the hounds went crazy trying to jump up and pull him out of there, jaws snapping, slobber flying.

Her brother looked at the coon and said no.

His uncle laughed and looked at him and said why? you afraid you can't hit him? and her brother said no, he could hit him all right, anybody could hit him.

His uncle said yeah? in the head? between the eyes? and her brother said yes. He just didn't want to. It was execution, he told her later, not hunting. He had looked to his father for support but he guessed that his father just saw this as some sort of rural rite of passage you just had to go through and his father was having no part of it, taking no sides at all.

His uncle saw that. So he smiled and said tell you what. You go ahead shoot him like you say you can, right between the eyes. Either that or I shoot him in the shoulder and let the dogs have a damn good night of it. He'll fall either way. You choose.

Her brother shot. And never hunted again.

Many years later her uncle died of cancer, died painfully, and she called her brother with the news.

Neither one of them was the least bit sorry.

But she remembered that story now, vivid and terrible as when he told it.

She *felt* it.

She was the raccoon. In the silence of the night she could almost hear the dogs in the distance.

Up here, if they found them, they were helpless.

People don't look up, she thought.

Melissa was sleeping now, but what if she woke and cried?

She felt as though she'd awakened from a drunk to find she'd done something horrible.

That it was stupid, *stupid* to be here.

There was the urgent need to get down at once, on land, where they could run. It was almost physical, a kind of sudden vertigo.

But go down to what? Where was safe? There were supposedly neighbors a mile and a half away or so, but in which direction?

"Mom?" Luke whispered.

She shushed him.

"Mom? *You hear that?*"

And then she did hear it, not far, the sound of a woman crying softly, a woman under exertion. She knew that voice, knew immediately who it was and felt a surge of happiness to know she was still alive, that and a dark fear of what was to come for her and them, linked together like birth and death. She heard soft footfalls too now and someone scuffling through the brush.

She turned to Luke and slid her finger to her lips.

He nodded.

They waited.

The sounds seemed to drift like ghosts, taking forever to reach them, freezing her blood as someone giggled and passed to the right of the platform just below her head.

If there was to be any hope for Amy she had to know where they were going, in which direction. She wanted desperately to see.

Yet there was no way she could raise her head. She felt paralyzed—even as the sounds drew slowly away. She was afraid the slightest move might wake Melissa. The slightest waking cooing sound, its echo in the still night air.

She was the raccoon now. Immobile. Sudden death made flesh in the pack below.

It was all she could do to whisper.

“See where they go!” she said.

Luke turned, raised himself slightly on one elbow. She saw his eyes locate them and follow.

When he settled back again his eyes were wide.

“That was Amy, Mom,” he whispered. “They had

Amy!”

“I know,” she said. “And it’s up to us to keep Melissa safe for her and get help for her as soon as we can.”

“Can’t we help her *now*?” he said. “They might *hurt* her, Mom.”

And she was proud of him—not for his courage because that was just a boy’s courage, foolish and immortal. But for his decency, his caring. She realized she was blinking back tears.

“How many did you see?” she said.

He thought about it, counted them out on his fingers.

“Five,” he said. “Not counting Amy.”

“Was there a man? A big man?”

He shook his head.

“Then we can’t go. Oh god! Not yet. He’s still around here somewhere.”

“But *Mom . . .*”

“We can’t, Luke. I love Amy. You know I do. I love her . . . very much. But we can’t.”

And it will do none of us any good if you start to

cry, she thought.

Still she not only knew what the raccoon felt, she finally knew something of what her brother was feeling too and understood his hatred ever after for people who were willing to put you in places like this, places where nothing you do could possibly be right or generous or life giving, and knew she was right never to have mourned her uncle's passing.

10:17 P.M.

“Halbard, for godsakes! It’s Halbard!”

“That’d be David Halbard,” said the cop. “Scrub Point Road. I’ll call it in.”

The name had come back to him almost as soon as he started thinking about something else.

Thinking about what he was into here, particularly.

They hadn’t gotten far. Up until this last bend in the road he could still see his battered car through the rear window.

Maybe it was the sheriff’s New York accent that brought his situation home. Or maybe it was the whiskey the fat guy handed him that stopped the shakes long enough for him to think. But here he was with three cops—he assumed the fat guy beside him was a cop, though he didn’t look like one. He looked too old, for one thing—and he was carrying scotch whiskey. But he assumed he was.

Three cops.

And there *he* was, sitting in the backseat with the old guy. Three fucking policemen.

Shit!

He didn't know which scared him most—going back there or being stuck with three cops doing it.

“Okay,” he said. “Look. You know where you’re going now, right? How ‘bout just letting me off. I really don’t want to go back there. Jesus christ, I don’t.”

The sheriff took his finger off the call button.

“You’ve had a bad shock, Mr. Carey. We know that. When I call this in I’ll call for an ambulance too, get some paramedics out here for you. Believe me, you’re a whole lot better off with us.”

“Hey, I’m fine now, really. I remembered the name, didn’t I? I can walk back to the car and . . .”

“Your car’s a mess, Mr. Carey. The only place it’s going is the garage. We’ll take care of it in the morning.”

“I could just wait there, then. I honestly don’t want to . . .”

“I appreciate your feelings. But I’m calling this in now. You’ll be fine, Mr. Carey, I promise you.”

Case closed, thought Steven. Cops. Shit. He felt the old cop’s eyes on him. Like he was some sort of freak.

He saw the woman with the ax smashing through the windshield. He saw Marion fat and naked on her bed, her tongue hanging out like a slice of liver, the hair dryer cord sunk deep into her neck.

“ . . . Halbard place on Scrub Point Road,” the sheriff was saying.

“You’re where?” said the dispatcher.

“Route Six, just past the mall.”

“Closest we got is car twelve-o up at Horse Neck Lane. I’ll get them on it.”

“Okay. And call everybody else off house-to-house and get them up here. We may have to go looking.”

“Will do.”

“And get me an ambulance. Lacerations, possible shock. Victim is Mr. Steven Douglas Carey, Connecticut license number M oh nine seven two, one five one eight four, one one three five three. Better make that two ambulances. You don’t know what we’ll find out here. Over.”

“You got it. Over.”

He didn’t like the cop giving his name. *Why did they have to give his name?* He guessed it was

routine. But he was getting a feeling about this. Like the car was shrinking, the front seat pressing up against his knees, the cop beside him subtly closer. It was bullshit. He felt it anyway.

He recognized things along the road now and saw that he'd come in this way, then had driven back blindly, not knowing where the hell he was going, just getting out of there, right along the same route. There was the broken-down tractor parked in the ditch, leaning precariously. And the roadside ad for Jim Beam whiskey. Both of them looking lonely against open empty fields beyond.

They were climbing into the hills. The turnoff onto Scrub Point Road was right around here someplace. Beyond the next bend or two.

Something was wrong. He could feel it.

The squawk box crackled to life.

"Sheriff? Confirmation on that name again?"

"Carey. Cable-Apple-Robin-Eve-Yellow. Steven Douglas."

There was a pause on the dispatcher's end, a moment of open air, and he knew before the man spoke again that what he was feeling was far from

bullshit, that this was pure trouble, that same white-light edge of something *about to happen* he'd felt back at Marion's, before the cord went around her neck, mere seconds before. Something coiled—cold, frightening, yet almost pleasurable, almost beautiful—inside him. *Easy*, he thought. *Take care. Take stock.*

Winding road. Sixty. Much too fast. Sharp curve ahead. Have to slowdown for that. Grassy shoulder. Dropping off down a steep hill. To what?

Nobody around, no lights anywhere.

They haven't locked the door yet.

Wait. Could be nothing.

The cop beside him was looking at him.

The squad car was slowing, going into the curve.

It's not nothing. Go!

"That's what I thought you said," said the dispatcher. "Interesting. We got an all-points on Steven Douglas Carey about an hour ago. Wanted for questioning related to the murder of . . ."

He slammed open the door, felt the cool air rush against him, tumbled and rolled with the impact. He felt stones bruise his ribs and thighs, the wet soft

grass, felt the car rush away ahead of him and then heard the squeal of brakes and still he was rolling, rolling down the hill, way down, the grass much higher now, rolling over cattails and tall thick marsh grass that sliced his face and hands yet slowed his fall, rolling finally to a stop in some kind of muck while the car doors slammed overhead. And then he was standing up, dizzy as hell at first, hardly able to stand. He shook his head to clear it and felt mud fly off his face.

He found solid earth again and started running.

The beams of flashlights played over the space behind him, coming down from the top of the hill.

Would they follow?

Marion, you bitch, you told on me. Even dead you told somehow.

He couldn't see anything at first. It didn't matter. He was running through water and then out of it again, not knowing which was which until he got there, just running, slogging through, slipping on rocks, pushing aside the cattails with flailing hands. He smelled stagnant water and rotten vegetation as the water grew deeper and he knew he was in some

slow-moving stream, moving gradually uphill against its flow.

That didn't matter either. What mattered was getting the hell away from them and he was doing that, all he had to do was go and keep on going and the months of handball had prepared him, *shit* he was strong, he wasn't even breathing hard and he knew one goddamn thing, that fat bastard wasn't going to be following.

Fuck 'em, he thought. *Fuck 'em*.

Oh you can't catch me. Oh no you can't catch me. If you get too close I'm gone, gone, gone like a cool breeze.

The Blues Project, 1967.

He'd never felt so free.

He heard his own laughter echo through the hills, his feet pounding the clay banks of the stream.

Fuck 'em all.

His eyes were working again, the moonlight bright as the clouds moved away and he saw he was in a forest, deep, with trees all around.

Shit yes, he thought. A forest. Plenty of places to hide.

He pulled off the new silk tie and dropped it in the muck behind him and ran.

10:25 P.M.

Manetti was on the horn again.

“ . . . right. Tell the state boys he bailed out about a hundred yards from Scrub Point Road off Six. Sounds like he’s moving upstream. We could hear him laughing down there like a goddamn loon. He keeps on laughing like that he won’t be hard to find. Keep me posted.”

Peters had his eyes on the rough dirt road ahead, searching for movement beyond the headlights.

He was gratified that Manetti hadn’t wanted to waste any time on this character. He’d known cops who would never have been able to take Carey getting away from them. Their egos couldn’t manage it. But Manetti had his priorities straight. The people on the hill were priority. And even if he did the murder, this guy was next to nothing tonight.

They pulled into the drive. It looked like half the lights in the house were burning inside.

Manetti left the engine running, his headlights and flasher on.

Normal procedure would be to wait for backup but Manetti wasn't having any of that either. From what the dispatcher said backup was still minutes away and minutes could make a difference here.

Peters' hand felt clammy on the butt of his .38. They stepped carefully out of the car.

Harrison threw the beam of his Maglite over the grounds. They saw shattered glass in the driveway from Steven Carey's windshield. Other than that, nothing.

Peters glanced over the house. Saw the steep hill, the stilts supporting the deck around the other side. The house had two floors and maybe a cellar and that was all.

Evidently you walked through this door directly into the kitchen. He flattened himself against the cedar shingle siding, then turned and looked through the window. There was a lobster pot in the sink. Canned goods and silverware scattered on the floor. No movement at all that he could see. He waited, made sure, then nodded to Manetti and Harrison who were poised with guns drawn at the door.

Harrison tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. The

knob was turning. He pushed it open and Manetti rushed inside. Harrison swung and covered him and then went in fast beside him. From there he turned a corner into the hall—Peters could see a bedroom and a stairway—while Manetti took the study. Peters was right behind him. The smell of blood telling him just who was going to find what, and where.

He left the door open a crack.

For the ventilation.

The guy lay on the floor near one of the computers. The computer screen and desk were covered with blood. So were the walls and the potbellied stove and the sliding glass doors.

His arms and legs were gone.

You could see inside the guy. His heart was missing and the liver and kidneys were missing, and there was nothing but a wide pool of blood exploding outward from where his genitals had been—as though he'd pissed himself away. Maybe they'd find his dick beneath a table somewhere.

Manetti was staring down at him.

“Fuck this,” he said.

Peters knew exactly how he was feeling. How

empty and hopeless it is when you're too damn late this time.

"This was a real nice guy," said Manetti. He shook his head. "Fuck this."

Peters gave him a moment.

"Halbard, right?" he asked.

Manetti nodded.

Miles Harrison was coming down the stairs. He turned the corner into the room and went white when he saw what was lying there.

"Anything?" asked Manetti. You could see him pull himself up. He was suddenly all business again. He knew his boys.

Harrison forced his eyes off the body. He swallowed. "Broken door to one of the upstairs bedrooms. There was a kid up there for sure, toys all over the place. Window's wide open, like maybe somebody got out that way, or tried to. The other room's got suitcases, perfumes, women's clothes. There's a bassinet in the downstairs bedroom and a king-sized bed. Men's and women's clothes in the closet."

"Hold it," said Peters. "Bassinet? We're talking

about another baby here?"

Harrison just looked at him, thinking, probably, pretty much the same thing he was thinking. That if things could get worse, they just had.

"There's no chance it's been sitting there awhile?"

Manetti's voice was quiet. "They had a daughter, I think it was. A few months ago."

And there was the headache again, pushing from somewhere in the back of his head. Maybe it had been there all along and he'd just become aware of it, just now let it in. He sighed. He thought about the pint in his inside jacket pocket and dismissed the idea. Maybe these people had some aspirin in the bathroom.

"I'll be back," he said.

He was in there with three of them in his hand when he heard a commotion in the den—voices and hurried movement across the floor. Peters stuck his head in.

Manetti and Harrison were at the open door. It looked to Peters like they were about to leave him there.

"Hey? What's up?" he said.

“Screaming,” said Harrison. His gun was drawn. “Somebody out there screaming.”

Claire saw the headlights and the flasher and thought, *Thank god!*

It had seemed like forever they were up there, hoping Melissa would continue sleeping, hoping no one would pass by, hoping for just this—headlights cutting through the night, bringing help and safety and a way out.

Luke saw them too. “All right!” he said.

There was no way she could depend on the police to search the woods. Certainly not right away. They might not get to that for hours or even till morning. Meantime these people were still out here.

And Amy was out here too. Not far.

They had to get down.

She'd called her own judgment into question almost constantly these days—inevitable aftershocks of the marriage. Nine years ago she'd embarked on what she thought of as the single *real* adventure that two people could have together—

love, commitment, home, and family—embarked upon it because she thought she knew her partner. And had not.

If she could get this wrong, what else? Certainty was like a skittish colt—she couldn't grab the reins.

But Amy was out there. That was certain. And twenty years of friendship left her very little room for doubt for a change.

“Me first,” she said.

She wrapped Melissa in the comforter. The baby's eyes flicked open and she smiled. Claire forced a smile back at her. Her foot found the first rung of the ladder. Carefully, she started down.

She glanced up at Luke crouched on the platform. He was watching her protectively, as though ready to reach out and grab her if she missed a step. The breeze billowed her light summer dress.

There was only one board that had felt really loose to her on the way up and she was on it now, edging her foot over so that she was right on top of the double nails for maximum support. Melissa was regarding her seriously, brow furrowed, staring wide-eyed at her chin. She gave the board her weight. It

squeaked and held.

She was down. She saw Luke silhouetted against the dark sky, peering over the platform.

“Come on!” she whispered.

He shifted under the railing to the ladder. She glanced right and left down the trail. She felt the insistent need to hurry, an irrational fear that for some reason the police and squad car wouldn't stay, that they'd get to the house and they'd already be gone, leaving them alone in Amy's empty home, still echoing with screams.

Luke dropped down beside her. Her right hand fluttered over his shoulder, across his chest. Needing the contact, needing to reassure itself that he was there, intact, all right.

Then they were moving down the trail together. Clouds across the moon defeated the urge to hurry. The trail was dark and narrow. They passed slowly through the shallow cut between hills and up the other side. Melissa began crying again, swiping with her tiny hands. Claire hugged her close, patting and stroking her back. She subsided.

At the top of the hill they looked across the dark

canopy of scrub and beyond that toward the house, obscured by trees. The sky was brighter there. She could see colored lights—the flasher.

The police. Safety.

They started down.

The clouds passed by and they walked in moonlight for a moment. Then the trees pressed close, leaning meeting at their tops above the trail, blocking out the light.

She stumbled. The path was rocky here. She caught herself immediately but Melissa began to cry in outrage and surprise. She patted her, stroked her, bounced her gently in her weary arms.

And now the trail opened up again. They were in moonlight again, the last stand of trees before the open field just yards away.

“Come on,” she said. “Hurry.”

Luke tried to edge ahead of her but something made her thrust him back—so abruptly that he almost fell. And she had time to regret this, to feel bad about denying him and pushing him and even to wonder for a moment why she’d done it before the man stepped out into the path, into the light from

between the trees.

You son of a bitch, she thought. Get away.

It wasn't fair. In her mind she could see the lights and flashers below, imagine the gentle awkward arms of the policeman reaching for Melissa, see them running up the hill, guns drawn, after Amy.

Fear and anger in conflict crawled across her flesh like red and black ants aswarm in battle. She swung at them crazily.

Get away.

Fear of him—of his bulk, his excrement smell and his confident stance. Of the eyes like the eyes of dogs gone wild. Of his ax turning slowly in the moonlight.

Anger at his arrogance that he should *dare* to frighten them. A woman, a boy, a baby.

Anger at his cowardice.

Fear of his power.

She wanted to run and attack him at the same time. She knew that neither was right, that neither would get her anywhere, that whichever one she chose would see her dead on the ground in front of him, she saw her body twitching at his feet on that

very spot, and knew in an instant that there was only one way she could survive this and that was to do both these things at once, to split herself in two, to run from him and attack at the same time—and that was possible. Because she was not one. She had not been one for many years now.

She was two.

“Luke!”

He was frozen to the spot, staring.

She thrust the baby into his arms. The man stepped forward.

Her eyes scanned the ground. No sticks, nothing to swing to keep him at bay, but the path was still rocky there so she stooped and clawed at the rocks, clawed at them and around them, digging her fingers into the hard-packed soil, but they wouldn't give, they were sunk too deep, the earth would not release its grip.

And he was coming. Swinging the ax.

She got down on her hands and knees and clawed, gasping, tears of frustration flowing.

She felt Luke take one step away behind her. Yes. That was right. She turned.

“Run!” she screamed.

Melissa was wailing.

“Mom?”

“Run!”

He was almost on them and she was starting to stand so that at least her body would be between them—at least that—when Luke turned and ran and she felt a sudden, release—a sudden sharp intake of breath as though she were running too. She stood up, prepared to meet him, to take the ax deep into her if need be. To hurt him somehow if possible.

But the man only looked at her, a moment of confusion in his eyes. Then he looked after Luke. And she saw who was important to him and what he was going to do.

“Noooo!” she screamed, and hurled herself forward, clawing at *him* now and not the unyielding earth. The man flung her aside but she’d thrown him off balance for an instant. He righted himself and she was on him again even as he turned to run, arms around his legs. He made a startled sound and fell, his body thudding to the ground and tumbling away

from her, turning, coming up with the handle of the ax. She felt it slam the side of her face, tasted blood. Her grip on his legs weakened but he wasn't free of her, not yet, she was holding on, giving Luke time, even as her vision swam and lights began to burst behind her eyes.

He kicked one leg free and pushed her away, pounded at her face and she swallowed blood this time and felt her back teeth splinter and something bore into her upper palate. She lost her grip. He pulled his leg away. Her hands came off him weak and smeared with mud.

She lay there and saw him stand, searching, looking for Luke. Listening. She struggled to her knees.

Luke was gone. He was nowhere in sight. The trail was an utter miracle of stillness.

Through the pain she felt pleasure, contempt for him, triumph.

They were two now. One of them free.

She felt this even as he reached into her hair, her scream escaping into the silence, and pulled her to her feet.

The Woman crouched hidden amid ferns and brush.

She watched the man coming toward them, plodding upstream.

The man was tiring.

Behind her, deeper back, Eartheater and Rabbit watched, too—Eartheater only sporadically as she peeled the young horsetail shoot, munching on its sweet interior.

The Woman did not recognize the man and his presence in the stream disturbed her. For one thing he was dressed oddly: a coat that did not close over his body but instead flapped back and forth across his chest as he walked, sleeves so short his shirt showed through at the wrists, as though he had taken the coat from someone smaller.

From prey, perhaps.

For another thing, the man was smiling.

It was not the same sort of smile Rabbit wore—and was wearing now—not a fool's exactly. But it had in common with Rabbit's smile a troubling lack of reason. The man was breathing heavily, walking now on the bank and now through the water, his

trouser legs thick with mud. He was alone, tired, walking in the night.

Yet the man was unafraid. The man was smiling.

She did not think she had ever seen him before. But the man was comfortable there. He looked like he belonged there.

As her people did.

For a moment she almost feared him.

As he drew closer to her she saw the hardness in the smile, the cold glittering eyes. Saw that he, too, had taken pleasure in the hunt.

Yet compared to her the man was soft.

She had only to watch him breathe.

Instinctively she saw in him a rival for the child's blood. She needed no such rival. The man might have tricks, knowledge. Physical strength was not the only thing. But she watched him with a curiosity she had rarely known. Except for the Cow she had never stolen a man in full manhood, and the Cow was hardly a man, the Cow had never been. She watched him splash through the stream like a child. She was loath to kill him until the smile was gone—until she knew *why* he smiled.

She waited until he passed and then stepped out of the brush behind him into the water, drew her knife and even as he became aware of her and began to turn, slashed through the tendons in back of his left knee.

The man looked at her astonished as he fell, clutching the wound.

He stared at her, eyes glittering and cloudy with pain.

The man would stay there. The man would not get far.

He did not cry out but only lay there in the water, looking up at her in amazement as she waved Rabbit and Eartheater out of their warren.

She gazed at the banks to mark the spot, then moved upstream.

Only once did she look back, and that was just before they started running—when they heard the woman scream.

He had dragged himself up out of the water to the bank, and he was listening too.

She had seen a wolf once whose leg had been broken in a trap. The wolf was pulling, dragging the

trap, had torn it from the ground, had dragged it to the top of a hill and stood poised there on three legs panting and howling furiously into the night sky, its jaws snapping.

To her at this moment, man and wolf looked nearly the same.

10:42 P.M.

I'm too damn old for this, Mary, thought Peters. *They were right, they should have damn well left me.*

His heart was beating like a Joe Morello solo, probably in 5/4 time at that, and he couldn't have caught his breath if it sat there half an hour waiting for him. His legs felt shaky and his feet hurt like hell, but he was keeping up, almost, Manetti and Harrison only twenty feet ahead of him, except that they were going *down* the hill while he was just standing on top of the rise, trying not to quit.

He glanced over his shoulder toward the house. They'd called in their position and where they were going but backup still hadn't arrived—he saw no lights but their own.

They'd spread themselves too thin, he realized. And part of that was his fault. They should have concentrated on the immediate area, kept the cars within a couple miles of the Kaltsas home, warning people there instead of going all the hell to Lubec

and back. It would have kept them more together. But there was no way to have known that then. No way to know where these sons of bitches would be.

He followed them down, his legs resisting the momentum that might have taken legs younger than his halfway up the second hill before tiring, his own legs scared of the momentum, scared of falling out from under him.

By the time he reached the bottom Manetti and Harrison were halfway up.

By the time *he* was halfway up they were out of sight completely.

He felt like a boat in a trough on a stormy sea—you couldn't make the horizon for the wave action. From here all he could see was treetops. He hauled himself up.

Man against gravity.

At the top his poor legs were shaking so badly his balance was off and he almost tumbled back down again. He stood there a moment puffing, trying to locate them up ahead and when his eyes started to focus there they were, stopped, looking back at him, standing at the edge of a dark stand of scrub pine

leaning together treetop to treetop above the path like fingertips meshed in prayer, waiting for him to appear, waiting for the old guy to get in gear and catch up.

And he guessed they saw him step forward a few steps, moving better now over the flat surface of the hilltop, because they gave him a second or two and then when he was about fifteen feet away started into the shadows, thinking that was close enough, they were pretty much together again. And he was coming into the shadows himself, his irises expanding to accommodate the dark, when he heard the first shot and felt something or someone ram him dead on in the stomach, knocking him flat, the .38 spinning out of his hand into the brush, the bottle bursting inside his jacket flooding the night air with the ripe stink of whiskey.

He felt the invasion of steel in his chest and heard Harrison's voice go teenage octaves higher in sharp bright squeals of pain.

The Woman was as surprised as they were.

But she was faster.

Rabbit too, even faster than she was, running past the two men in front of her to the fat man behind and leaping, throwing his body across the man, knocking him down and stabbing with his knife.

She saw this even as she herself reached for the gun hand of the younger, taller man, cracked his wrist and pulled him to her, the gun discharging once, her sharp knife slicing up through trousers, leather belt and shirt to his breastbone in a huge vertical slit that sprayed her body with hot blood while Eartheater hurled herself at the thinner man, her legs around his waist, her left arm over his shoulder as she slashed at his eyes with the three-pronged steel hand spade, the Woman aware—preternaturally aware, like a hawk swooping suddenly through their midst—of all her surroundings as the left eye burst in its socket and the man pressed his gun to Eartheater's neck and fired.

The young man in front of her fell to his knees, shocked, clutching at the gurgling spill of white intestines as Eartheater's head slid sideways like a flower on a broken stem, the sound of her flesh like raindrops falling, pattering the leaves of brush and

ferns and the trunks of trees. And Rabbit knew too what the man had done because he stabbed the fat man's chest once more and then slid away, ran to where the thin man flung his sister's clutching body off him, and leaped upon his back. Eartheater's body turned, falling. Rabbit stabbed.

The man fired into the trees as the Woman jumped and kicked him in the chest, whirled, stabbed him once through the neck, his windpipe cracking, withdrew the knife as Rabbit dropped off him and the man leaned forward to clutch his neck, his gun dropping away, and then took the knife in both her hands, turning the blade toward her, and stabbed him again through the back of the neck this time, shoving the knife deep, grinding up past the cervical vertebrae of the neck into the brain.

The man trembled wildly, his mouth spewing fountains of dark arterial blood. Then fell.

The night was silent.

The blood across her face and breasts began to dry.

For once, Rabbit was not smiling.

The Woman gathered up their weapons, their

guns.

She could not find the fat man's gun. She supposed it had fallen in the brush somewhere out of sight.

She stood for a moment beside his body. She looked at him closely. Somehow he seemed familiar to her. A face glimpsed long ago. But the Woman could not remember.

His jacket was soaked through where Rabbit had used the knife. She kicked him in the ribs for good measure. The fat man did not move.

She looked again.

The man was a mystery. His familiarity to her.

But there were other mysteries.

The infant child was one.

She had heard the woman's screams not far from this place and hoped that First Stolen had found them, all of them, the boy, the woman—but mostly the infant spirit who would remove the taint of unspilled blood.

There had been no further screams.

There was nothing to do now except go and see.

She hauled the body of Eartheater up onto her shoulder. The Woman did not look at the gaping wound. It was not a good thing to dwell on how another died.

With Rabbit silent behind her and Eartheater's still-warm blood trickling down across her back to the earth that named her, she turned toward the sea.

Luke hid behind the tree in the dark shadow of the treehouse platform above him, looking back down the trail. At the man and his mother.

He could see them clearly.

The man had one hand twisted in his mother's hair, dragging her behind him at first—she was crying, trying to walk backward, stumbling—then thrusting her out in front of him, the head of his ax pressed flat into her lower back.

A warning.

The man would tug at her hair and the ax would dig into her back and make her gasp in pain.

He was enjoying hurting his mother.

Luke had never been so scared, watching the man hurting her.

He remembered something he'd forgotten for a very long time. He'd come downstairs one night awakened by loud voices and saw his mother backed up against the refrigerator, his father with one hand around her neck and holding a glass of something with the other. His father would alternately drink from the glass and hold it up to her face as though he were going to hit her with it maybe, and all the time he was yelling that she had no business telling him what to do with his time, that he'd be home when he fucking wanted to *if* he fucking wanted to and she could just go fuck herself and wait for him or not as she fucking pleased.

He'd used the F word a lot and he was saying it in a mean way, not the kind of joking way the kids used it in the playground at school, and all the time he had her by the neck she was telling him to let go, please let go Steven—trying not to cry, he could tell. But Luke was crying, though he was hardly even aware of it, and they heard him and when his father turned and saw him he did let go finally, and his mother went over to him and brought him upstairs.

The next night she had wanted to talk.

He hadn't.

It was weird but he wished he had now.

Now that he was so scared for her again.

Melissa was making crying sounds and that scared him too. Not loud, but the man was going to hear them if he didn't do something.

He didn't know what to do.

They were getting closer.

His mother had told him that you had to be real careful with babies, that when they were little like this you could hurt them by mistake without trying. If Melissa had been a kid his age he would have just put his hand over her mouth to shut her up . . . but what if he did that with Melissa and it hurt her?

Oh, jeez, they were close!

His mother was making gasping crying sounds from the man pulling her hair and shoving her and he guessed that was mostly what the man was hearing but *they were too close and he had to do something with Melissa*. He looked down at her and she looked so small almost like a puppy and he was afraid to hurt her and afraid to keep his hand *off* her because the man was going to hear them and find them and

drag them too. There were tears running down his cheeks but he put his hand over her mouth because he *had* to he couldn't help it and the sounds almost grew louder for a moment—he guessed Melissa must have realized what he was doing and started crying seriously, squirming and pushing at him as he thought, *Please, Melissa, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, only just for a minute, please*, and he increased the pressure because she was still too loud, afraid of hurting her all the while and feeling that he had to go to the bathroom bad and watching the man and his mother abreast of them now, passing, his mother's voice shrill and thin as the man yanked at her hair and she almost fell, then moaning as they passed, her voice and their scuffling feet along the trail masking Melissa's crying sounds—and knew that she had saved him a second time.

He hardly dared breathe himself.

He kept his hand there on her until they were over the rise, easing off on the pressure and easing his hand off her slowly, as gently as he could. Finally he took his hand away completely. And when she wasn't hurt or dead, when all she did was look at him

he raised her up and kissed her on the forehead a dozen times. He loved her as much as he'd ever loved anybody in his life right then.

She looked at him strangely, as though wondering what this new game was supposed to be. And then smiled.

And suddenly he felt the pull.

She was getting away from him. *His mother.*

She was going out of sight, over the rise.

She'd be gone.

Suddenly he was terrified—that if he didn't follow he'd just never see her again. He *knew* he'd never see her.

It was as certain to him as the fact that he was in the third grade and that his mother thought his room was always messy and that he had a bike and a skateboard back at home in the yard.

He wouldn't see her! He'd lose her!

Mom!

It was a pull so strong he shook in the wake of it.

He was terrified of the man. The man was *horrible*. Worse than Jason, worse than Freddy

Krueger—worse than *anybody*.

But if his mother went away he'd be . . .
. . . *alone*.

His heart thumped harder now than when the man had passed, he was *that scared*, a raw panic that clogged his throat and he had to do something *now*, do something fast, he couldn't wait for help because he couldn't even see the man and his mother anymore, and help was all the way down there minutes and far away—and maybe the police were even gone already, disappeared, they *could* be. He had to follow and find them. Had to see her, know she was there nearby and keep her in sight.

He almost started out across the path. And then he thought, *Melissa*.

How could he take Melissa?

Melissa would cry!

Her diaper would get wet or something and she'd cry!

He felt a moment of total confusion, almost cursed his mother for leaving this baby there with him . . . and then a kind of instant clarity that made him feel suddenly older, a whole lot smarter than he'd ever

thought he was and maybe even *up* to this, *ready* for this, up to following and not getting caught and maybe even helping somehow.

Helping her.

He climbed the ladder again.

He lay Melissa down in the center of the platform, bunched up one end of the comforter to form a kind of pillow and wrapped the rest around her, tucking it tight so she wouldn't catch cold—though the night was still pretty warm.

"I'll be back," he whispered. Melissa made a hiccupping kind of sound and flexed her fingers, reaching out to him.

"Don't you worry."

He climbed down and sprinted to the top of the hill.

He felt a huge weight lift away as he saw them below, moving slowly through the clearing.

The man was still pushing her, hurting her, but there she was, walking, standing, still alive.

Staying in the scrub, in the shadows and only just close enough to keep them in sight, his lifeline still strung tight between them, he followed.

A little later he heard gunfire in the hills.

It sounded like firecrackers. But Luke knew it was guns.

It might be help and it might not. He hoped it was. But it was far away by then and not his problem.

His problem was to keep her somehow. To hold on to her. And by doing so, make them back into a family again.

To that end he aged—and grew stealthy in the moonlight.

11:15 P.M.

Somewhere a baby was crying.

It was dark in the cave and she couldn't see beyond the dim glow of the banked fire. She heard moans and the rattle of chains and the baby crying and for a moment thought, *Melissa?* but the voice didn't belong to her.

She knew her baby's voice.

The girl pulled her inside and handed over the leather thongs that bound her to someone else, she couldn't see who at first, and then a figure appeared before the fire, piling on first twigs and then sticks and logs, and as the fire rose up she saw that it was one of the twin boys at the fire and the other who held the thongs.

She heard the girl drop the plastic mop bucket to the ground. The fire spread, light and shadow licking the walls of the cave, and she could see them now, the teenage girl covering her scarred and wounded nakedness with a man's faded blue shirt that was much too big for her, pulled from a pile over three

feet high that lay near the entrance. A mouse, startled, ran from somewhere within the pile into the shadows.

She looked around the cave and felt reality dart away, too. Into the shadows, like the mouse.

The walls were hung with skins.

Some she could identify. Raccoon, skunk, deerskin.

Others were unfamiliar. Pale and translucent.

She refused them and looked away.

She saw a rough order. Except for the clothing and a pile of tools and weapons their possessions were arranged according to size, not function.

Small cooking pots, empty tin cans and full ones, a small broken wicker basket, tarnished brass candlesticks and a dirty stuffed teddy bear were all thrown together. Smaller things—spoons, forks, spools of thread, keys and key chains, pairs of broken eyeglasses, wallets, coins, a corkscrew, and a cane chair from a dollhouse—formed a pile directly at her feet.

Another pile rose halfway up the wall, a jumble of larger items. A pair of dented lobster pots side by

side with an antique pine milking-stool, its legs corroded and caked with dirt, marked white by salt water. These beside a faded wooden checkerboard, a plastic five-gallon bleach container, and an empty screened cat carrier. These on top of a ghetto blaster—smashed—a suitcase, and a dented metal tub.

There were piles of bleached white bones all along the walls of the cave.

Jawbones. Skulls.

Animal and . . . otherwise.

She saw the boy with the clouded eye and the girl who wore the skin of breasts skewering wrists and ankles with rusted meat hooks tied by loops pegged to the roof of the cave. Legs and arms dangling, oozing viscous blood. Swaying.

Not David's anymore.

To think of them as his was to open a door that needed to remain tightly shut, a door within and beyond the cave that opened up to pure blank light and emptiness.

The baby cried.

She saw it now, lying on a pile of pine needles and

branches over which had been tossed a single stained blanket with frayed edges. No older than Melissa.

Naked. A girl.

She smelled it too. A thin trail of feces glistened between her open legs.

The others ignored her.

The baby was hungry. She could feel her breasts ache in automatic response.

She had only this week begun to steer Melissa toward solid foods, starting with just the tiniest taste of Beech Nut rice mixed with formula.

She still had plenty of milk.

Soon her breasts would be leaking—that was automatic too. She felt a flash of frustrated rage. For her body to do that to her now would be a complete betrayal of itself. Of her.

Of that part of her that was not the body.
Infuriating.

She would not allow it.

She looked away.

Because it ought to have been Melissa she was

with, her own child in her own home, at her breast in her bedroom. Not this . . . creature . . . who at three months old was already as filthy as the rest of them, thin foul liquid dribbling from between her legs.

She did not want to think about the baby. It was only there as another torment to her, to squeeze the tears from her eyes, to make her weak.

She would not be weak.

It's dead, she thought. I just killed it.

To hell with this baby.

They were beside her now, both the twins, pushing her past the fire, deeper into the cave. She let herself be pushed. There was no use trying to resist them. Not with her hands tied. She had seen the strength of the teenage girl . . .

. . . seen it as she pulled David down, her arms curling round him like snakes, her mouth open . . .

She heard metal rattle on metal again. She saw the man chained in the shadows in the back of the cave, saw him leaning forward against his chains, his body thin and slack and so pale that even the firelight's orange-red glow failed to lend him color, his eyes empty, unseeing, looking *through* her as

she passed and they shoved her forward and then turned her beside him a few feet away and pushed her back roughly to the wall.

The man did not seem to register that she was there. His gaunt jaw hung open and flies buzzed in and out, settling on his teeth and tongue.

She saw the reason for the flies immediately.

A puddle of urine at his feet, a pile of feces between his legs, tumbling out from behind and beneath him.

She realized the man had been there for many days. Standing amid his own excrement.

She felt her stomach heave.

Already the swarm had found her, buzzing across her arms and face.

She swiped at them, the twin boys laughing at the awkwardness of her bound hands.

The girl stepped toward her past the fire. The boys made way.

The girl stood in front of her and untied the thong on her left wrist, then pushed both arms behind her and tied her again, tight.

She smiled and ran her fingers through Amy's long

brown hair, pulling roughly through the tangles, through the burrs and twigs. Her eyes flickered up and down her body.

She was aware again of her open nightgown, of the flimsy bra and panties. The girl's eyes pawed her.

The girl turned and walked back past the fire. A moment later she returned carrying a length of clothesline and a knife.

And it was not the knife she was suddenly afraid of, it was the line, because the girl was all business with the knife, looping about fifteen feet off the line and cutting it, dropping the knife nearly into the urine pooling out beside her and throwing the line over a wide outcropping of rock above her head.

She watched the line sway and dangle—then saw the girl pull it tight to neck level and panic seized her and she began to struggle. But the twin boys had moved in close beside her, they had her arms now and they had knives too and placed them on either side of her ribs and held them there sharp and cold against her flesh, not cutting her, barely pressing in. But enough.

"Please," she said.

She looked at the girl. The girl was concentrating, making a knot in the line. Deaf to her.

The girl made several tries before she got it right, a loop at the far end.

Small, she thought. Not nearly large enough. Not to go over my head.

So they were not going to kill her after all. Not yet.

The girl pulled at the cord. The knot slipped forward.

She reached abruptly into Amy's hair again and pulled it back so tight that she cried out, gathered it into a fist and then slipped the loop around it, pulled hard on the cord and then let go with her hand. Where her hand had been the cord now bound her hair together.

She felt a thousand pinprick stabs of pain all along her hairline and through her scalp, yet she could bear this, it was better than hanging, better than dying never seeing Melissa again in this place with flies crawling over her eyes and into her nostrils, the baby squalling, wanting, *smelling* the milk inside her. She could bear this. And live.

She knew she could live.

Until the girl reached down for the other end of the rope and pulled, the twins helping, her feet suddenly lifting off the cool floor of the cave so that she dangled in midair and each of the pinprick stabs multiplied a thousandfold, burning, her body swaying and her mouth falling open in a choked-off, guttural scream.

The flies flew in and out.

11:47 P.M.

At the place where the trail branched off to the cliffs the Woman handed Eartheater's body over to Rabbit, placing it squarely on his shoulder, its ruined neck belching a single spurt of blood and fluid across the moss and lichen.

She watched him until he was out of sight, moving toward the cave.

He handled his burden well.

He would grow to be strong—as strong as First Stolen. If only someday he would develop sense.

She had seen no sign of First Stolen, nor of the screaming woman, the boy, or the child. So that it was best now for all of them to return to the cave. To regroup if First Stolen had not found them, and reconsider.

It was early. The moon was bright. There was still plenty of time for the hunt.

She turned down the hill toward the stream, making her way carefully through the deep woods to the place she had left the man hamstrung, bleeding

in the water.

He hadn't gotten far.

She saw him on the bank, turned over on his side, both shoes resting beside him, trying to bind the wound with his long black stocking. But his hands were trembling with the pain and kept slipping—he seemed to have no strength in them. He couldn't get it tight. Beneath the dried brown blood his face was pale. His eyes burned as she approached him.

"Get the fuck away from me."

The man was dangerous.

Fascinating.

A wolf in his trap.

"You fucking crazy bitch. Get the . . ."

She drew her knife. She knelt beside him and placed its point to the bridge of his nose directly between his eyes. She waited until the sharp point of the knife had its say in him, until the fire burned low in his eyes and he grew calm with respect for what she could do to him now or any time.

She put the taped handle of the knife between her teeth and took one end of his stocking in either hand and pulled it tight, knotting it twice.

The man's breath hissed through clenched teeth. Except for that he made no sound.

She stood and slid the knife into its sheath. The man looked up at her, his dark eyes narrowing. She saw him glance at the guns pushed through her belt.

She smiled. This wolf would bite if given the opportunity.

She offered him her hand.

She would tame the wolf. If it could not be tamed then she would kill it. But first she would see.

She stood in full moonlight and watched the man's eyes drift across her scarred face to the fierce lightning streak through her hair. She knew the eyes were afraid of her and that was good. She knew too that they dreamed and planned, and that was not so good.

His eyes were thin narrow slits. They glittered in the moonlight. Behind them, in pain, hid the wolf.

She would draw the wolf out, snapping.

He took her hand.

She lifted him to his feet and draped his arm over her shoulder. The man did not look at her again, only at the earth below, careful of his step as she moved

him easily through the woods up the hill to the path, then over the path where Rabbit had come before her, to the cliff and the seawall.

Bringing him to his lair. And to his cage.

11:55 P.M.

Luke kept to the rocks, well behind them, as they walked the beach.

In the tide pools beside him seaweed like the black legs of spiders waved and swayed from barnacle-encrusted boulders. The rocks were splattered with white guano and the broken carcasses of land crabs.

He watched his footing—and he watched them. Two dark shapes leaving footprints in the lunar sand.

It was no longer possible for him to hear his mother. Maybe the man had stopped hurting her so she didn't have to cry out anymore, or maybe it was just the distance and the tide churning through the narrow channel that lay between them. Maybe she was still crying. He heard the roar of waves. That was all.

He had no plan. He had no idea what he was supposed to do or when. It just seemed right to follow, not letting the man know he was there. He wondered how long it was till daylight. Someone

might come along then. But he thought that daylight was probably a long way away and he had no idea what he would do till then. Just keep following them, he guessed. They might keep walking forever, right into daylight. It was possible.

The man was pulling her along by the front of her dress, making her keep up with him. The man walked fast and his mother stumbled sometimes but the man wouldn't stop, just pulled at her until she got to her feet again and started walking.

It was hard keeping up with them.

He was tired and sore and his feet hurt from the barnacles and shells on the rocks. But it was better near the shoreline, faster on the wet sand, and the rocks were there to hide him.

The air was damp here, chilly from the salt spray. He was thirsty.

From here the rocks angled out farther past the tide line. It was the first time he'd come across the problem. He had to stop a moment to consider it. Either he'd have to risk walking the open sand for a while—*the man could turn and see him*—or else he'd have to stay with the rocks. And he couldn't

think for long because they were getting ahead of him, he was already far away.

The rocks or the man.

The rocks felt safer.

He went over them on all fours. They were slippery. Waves rolled in and filled the tide pools, each wave bigger than the next until his pajamas were soaked and his hair was dripping. He had to step into the tide pools too and that was hard because you couldn't see how deep they were or what was in them—crabs or eels or what—hidden beneath the shifting foam.

He pulled himself up onto a low flat slab of granite. It felt slimy under his feet.

Something growing there.

He hopped over to a rounder, higher rock. His footing there was better. He crouched and went hands first onto an even bigger one, its surface sparkling with mica, crawling over it sideways—and then he was going to have to jump, because the rocks were angling back to shore now all except for this last one. This last one formed a kind of point. It was long and flat but half-hidden by the water, a

couple feet away.

He went into a crouch again and took a breath and jumped.

He hit the rock and his legs almost went out from under him, he had to scramble to keep his balance, but he got there, he was standing, and he looked up to see how far they'd gotten because he knew this had taken him longer than it should have, he should have risked the open sand, and he saw them way down the beach so far away that even if the man turned Luke doubted he'd notice him now standing way back here, and he started for the next rock which was an easy one going back toward shore when the wave slammed into his legs and knocked him over.

The backwash pulled him off the rock and under. He swallowed water. His feet touched sand and then it was gone again, he was rising. Then going under. He felt the undertow grip him like the invisible pincers of a huge crab, dragging him back until his lungs were throbbing.

He rose again, broke surface and opened his eyes and wiped away the sting, gulping air,

coughing. All he could see was another wave coming toward him, rising, and beyond that, another wave and beyond that, moonlight on the water. *Where was he? How far out?* He turned, splashing, trying to get his bearings as the wave caught him and pulled him forward in a rush of white water and he saw he was headed for the rocks, dark, gleaming, racing toward him like sharks, and something told him to go under.

He took a breath and ducked his head, threw his arms out in front of him and rode the churning water, felt himself turning upside down and back again, felt as though a roller coaster were taking him and tried to straighten as his forearm slammed against stone and went instantly dead and burning and the wave drove him into the sand, piling him in hard, scraping deep across his chin and chest. He rose almost to the surface, the breath bursting out of him past his lips as something hit him in the belly and the wave dragged him across the blunt narrow edge of a second rock.

His body folded in on itself. The sand swirled over him.

He turned face up.

Salt spray hit his cheeks.

His head, then his back drifted up to the sand at the shoreline.

He felt himself settle in, the sand washing away in tiny trenches around him, outlining his body. He lay there a moment gasping, the waves lapping gently now at his legs and rising up over him, lifting his arms spread wide at his sides, trying in vain to float him back again.

He had no idea where he was.

His left arm throbbed. His chin, chest and stomach burned in the cool breeze.

There was only one thought in his mind—that he'd lost them. Not that he'd almost died. That he would turn and not see her there, that somehow between then when he was standing on the rock and now his mother would be gone, disappeared.

He raised himself up on one arm, resisting the urge to cry, the *need* to cry, and looked behind him up the beach.

He was closer to them now than he'd ever been.

So incredibly close it was frightening.

He could see them clearly, his mother's dress torn in front where the man had been dragging her, her hair shining in the moonlight, even her face wet and stained with dirt and tears as they turned away from him toward the high jagged cliffs.

He flattened himself against the sand, motionless as driftwood, and watched them start to climb.

PART V

MAY 13, 1992
NIGHT

12:00 MIDNIGHT

Claire entered the cave to their silent stares, to the crackle of the fire, to the pounding waves far below, and to Amy's low moan.

The man had thrust her inside and stood behind her blocking the narrow entrance. As though worried she would run. As though she *could* have run seeing Amy there.

And what they'd done to her.

Her hands flew to her face, palms pressed deep into the sockets of her eyes. She shook her head against the sudden onset of dizziness and nausea.

It passed.

Her hands dropped to her sides, clenched into fists. She took a breath. She looked.

Before he retired, her father had been a high school teacher in Brookline, Massachusetts, an English teacher, who always seemed to like the movies—*films*, he called them respectfully—easily as much as he liked Jane Austen or Proust (though perhaps not quite so much as Hardy, Joyce, or

Henry Miller), and he had directed her to and even taken her to films through much of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when bold, often bleak personal visions were still very much in vogue, when American audiences, educated and troubled, apparently would still rather pay to see movies rooted to home truths about their lives than escapist melodramas and comedies.

Bonnie and Clyde. Easy Rider. Sunday Bloody Sunday. The Wild Bunch. Medium Cool. The Graduate. Five Easy Pieces.

Her father loved some of these movies until the day he died. She had loved them too.

Though her father had been a gentle man these films were often as bloody as the Vietnam War or the Chicago riots which in many cases formed their metaphorical and certainly their historical backdrops. Her father liked to quote the director Akira Kurosawa on the subject.

"To be an artist," said Kurosawa, "means never to avert one's eyes."

Her father was no artist, though he did paint the occasional muddy watercolor on a Sunday

afternoon. Nor was Claire. But it was the second part of the statement that stayed with her through the years, the wisdom in the notion of not averting one's eyes. She had done exactly the opposite with Steven, had looked away, ignored his drinking, ignored what she knew to be true, and since had flogged herself for it a thousand times.

The statement counseled toughness, honesty, rigor—and she did not so much remember it now as know that somewhere deep inside her, her father's exactitude of spirit moved in her, informed her, destroyed at first impulse that urge to retreat from what she saw that already wished to content her with mourning her friend's fate and her own and blur her sight.

"Let her down," she said.

Her voice was never very loud—not unless she was yelling at Luke—and it wasn't now. But it sounded loud in the cave. More firm, too, than she would have anticipated. Almost a teacher's voice. Almost like her father's.

Claire shook, trembling. The voice didn't.

No one moved except two of the children—twin

boys—who gazed at one another in surprise and then sniggered. Behind her the man laughed too, his voice pitched higher than she'd expected from a man his size. Almost a giggle. *Idiotic*, she thought. Evil and idiotic.

“Let her *down*.”

She saw the teenage girl, the one they had let into the house, her torn body covered by an old blue shirt, bent over a yellow plastic bucket, transferring something from the bucket to a rusted cast-iron pot. There was water in the pot.

The girl had her back to her, had turned when Claire entered and turned again now when she spoke, but only smiled and tossed her hair and returned to what she was doing.

At the back of the cave Amy groaned and tried to swallow.

Even that small motion caused her to sway, and the swaying caused her to moan.

They had cut away her bra and panties. Her robe hung open, dangling off her shoulders.

Thin rivulets of blood trickled down from her hairline across her face and neck, over the tops of

her breasts, staining her robe at the collar.

Dozens of them.

Her body slowly turned.

Flies buzzed all around her.

The naked man beside her shifted too, trembling, rattling his chains. There was a girl wearing some sort of skin strapped together behind her back standing in front of him, tugging at the raw flesh of his penis, totally involved with that and ignoring Claire completely.

Claire hesitated, picturing Luke and Melissa huddled in the darkening woods. And then stepped forward.

No one stopped her.

She walked past the twin boys to the girl and even as she became aware of what the girl was doing, of the bone piercing the chained man's scrotum, plucked the knife from the back of her belt.

The girl whirled, snarling—but Claire was all clean motion, reaching up and severing the clothesline and reaching down for Amy in a single sweep of her arms, cutting through the lines that bound her wrists.

Amy screamed and gasped in release and then

Claire was holding her, her warm familiar body, barely able to stand at first, Claire clutching her to make her stand as the girl plucked the knife roughly from her hand and held it first to her throat and then to Amy's—and suddenly the cave seemed to close around her. The man, the teenage girl, the boys, all of them appearing so fast and tight around her she could barely breathe with the stink of their bodies and their breath pouring over her like the heated breath of dogs. The man shoved her back against the wall. She clung to Amy's robe, protecting her with her arm, keeping the connection, and felt the arm go numb as her elbow struck granite.

She tried to ignore it. To ignore them all.

The flies swarmed angrily.

Amy looked up at her. She touched the bloody hairline. There was a film of pink in her eyes, a thin pink film of blood. Claire wiped them with the sleeve of her dress, wiped her friend's face and lips and closed the robe over her body.

The man stepped forward and reached into her hair. This time she resisted.

"No," she said.

But the man wasn't really trying. He was laughing at her.

They all were laughing. Moving back, easing the circle, giving him room.

The man shifted his hand to the front of her head and bumped it back against the wall, not hard enough to do her any harm but hard enough to hurt, bumped it over and over in measured cadences, the pain nothing at first and then cumulative, playing with her, until lights started flashing behind her eyes. She held tight to Amy and waited, waiting out the hurt, Amy her lifeline and Claire hers, listening to their laughter and somewhere, to a baby waking, crying, its voice harsh and echoing through the cave.

She gritted her teeth and waited.

Thump.

And slowly felt something start to build in her, something she knew was dangerous to them both and barely under control but irresistible as they laughed and the infant howled and one twin boy reached out with one hand to pinch and twist her nipple and the other to poke her ribs.

Thump.

Laughter.

Her stomach. Her ribs again. Poking.

Bullies. Like Steven. Like all of them.

Thump.

Then a pair of hands reached across her to Amy's shoulders, trying to pull her away—the hands of the girl who had deceived them.

Claire clung tight, felt Amy's cool fingers clutch her arms, the pressure inside her building, knowing that it was only a matter of moments now and they would separate them again, this possibly for the last time, possibly forever, that the girl was far stronger than she and could do that, not being able to bear that in any way whatsoever and aware of Amy sobbing and the sense of danger and anger and awful potential mounting until—

Thump.

Something ripped bursting inside her and she pushed back off the wall in fury and put all of her weight into the forward thrust of her knee, the sound of it loud as an ax chopping into him or into the trunk of a tree until he screamed full into the echo of the sound, drowning it, clutching at his groin and falling

to his knees in front of her and rolled toward the fire, stopping just in front of the fire, rolling as though *on* fire, the fire licking at his balls, at his idiot brutal manhood.

And as the teenage girl jerked Amy out of her arms and the twins and the girl with the skin grabbed Claire and threw her to the ground, as they kicked her in the ribs, in the head, in the back, as the pain raced through her and off her like a bird of prey skimming the ocean, she watched the man rolling by the fire.

She watched and watched.

12:05 A.M.

Peters' chest felt like a breeding ground for killer bees.

It was the whiskey. It stung like a sonovabitch in the two shallow knife wounds near his sternum.

But it was also the whiskey that had saved his life. Supposing he was going to live.

Forget that he smelled like the floor of the Caribou the day after New Year's Eve. He *looked* like a stuck pig. The stain went from his armpits to his belt buckle, all the way down his sides. In the dark it would be indistinguishable from blood.

They'd have taken one look and thought, that's one dead drunk lying there.

There was blood all right but he wasn't bleeding to death. Not yet. The kid had been in a hurry, though from the feel of it he suspected his knife had chipped a bone. The wound in his side was much deeper and there was more blood there than was running out of his chest but the kid had cut into gristle, nothing more that he could tell—it was what the old cowboy

movies called a flesh wound, or at least he hoped it was.

Bastard hurt, though.

He knelt back on his heels and thought about things awhile, not wanting to move until he knew what he was moving to.

There was no point checking Manetti or Harrison. He was close enough to see them and there was plenty of moonlight, and you got so you could recognize a dead man as easily as a dog lying dead in the highway, a kind of displaced emptiness hanging over them like a broken TV in a junkyard.

Their deaths disgusted him like Caggiano's had disgusted him. All brave good boys gone long before their time.

Miles Harrison was their newspaper boy.

Remember, Mary?

There wasn't time to mourn them. Any of them.

The .38 was the first thing.

It had gone flying when the kid hit him but it couldn't have gone far.

He took off his jacket, shook the broken glass out of it and brushed it off his shirt, then tied its arms

over the wound in his side, knotted it and knelt in the brush, feeling with his hands to the right and left, moving slightly deeper, feeling again over the cool hard-packed earth and lightly around the thorny, woody stems of brush, deeper by a foot and then two feet and then three, being patient, cursing the sharp pangs in his chest and side but still patient, until finally his hand brushed the smooth barrel of the gun. He pushed his way slowly back through the brush and sat down.

When his breathing was even again he stood up and holstered the gun and walked over to Harrison and Manetti. There was a sticky pool of dried blood a few feet away from Manetti that didn't correspond to either his position or Harrison's.

So you got one, Vic, he thought. I almost would have bet you'd have managed that.

And I'll bet they took whoever you got home with them too.

He could see that they'd moved quickly, while the body was still doing plenty of bleeding. It left a nice clean trail to follow. His vision wasn't what it used to be but he'd done enough hunting in his day to handle

this one.

Got a head wound or neck wound here, he thought, judging from the amount of blood. Whoever was carrying it was swinging the body back and forth, probably hauled up on his shoulder, the body swaying with his gait. Blood not only spotted the path but also sprayed leaves in the brush beside him and farther on, the trunks of trees.

He looked at his watch. An hour and a quarter or more he'd been lying there.

Shit.

He walked back to the rim of the hill. He could see the house lights below. There were squad cars down there now, seven or eight sets of headlights and red-and-blue flashers. But nobody coming his way that he could see. It was tough to know for sure because the tops of trees obscured the field. They could be out there, maybe not far away. They might not.

He considered his options.

From here to the cliffs was basically flat and, and that he could handle. Going down to meet them at the house or the field was going to be harder. A whole lot harder.

Not the getting down—that he could handle, too—but the getting back up again. It had been bad enough when he wasn't leaking blood all over the place.

He could describe to the troopers with a good deal of accuracy where this had happened. But it was still going to take them time to find it.

Time for him to haul himself down over the hills. Time for him to tell the story. Time to point the way.

Time these people likely didn't have.

To hell with it, he thought.

They had an hour and fifteen minutes' lead on him. They might not be out of earshot yet, but it would still be safe to fire. There wouldn't be any sense of immediate danger to them, nothing that would cause them to panic and start in killing people. They'd know that whoever it was was way back. Could be a hunter for all they knew.

He pointed the .38 into the air and fired, waited until the echo died away and fired again, waited and fired a third time.

The breeze was down considerably and the air was still. If there were any kind of cops worth their

pay down there they should be able to take a rough estimate of his position.

Anyhow, it was the best he could do.

With all the activity the wound in his side was doing too much bleeding. It might just kill him after all. With a knife wound deep as that you never knew. He tied the jacket tighter.

He dug into his pocket and filled the empty chambers of the gun.

No more shooting till the shooting starts, he thought, and began to follow.

12:12 A.M.

The Woman entered the cave and let the man drop before the fire. By then the man was willing to drop.

She took it in—the woman clutching her robe by the Cow in the back of the cave. The second woman lying on the floor, bruised, her face bloody, dress torn. Looking up terrified at the twin boys standing over her. The boys grinning red, blue and silver.

And no infant except for Second Stolen's, mewling by the wall.

And no Eartheater. And no Rabbit.

Who should have been here long before her.

First Stolen approached the Woman cautiously, knowing she was angry. She could see that he had been hurt somehow and was mending. She did not care how or why.

All she felt was anger.

He had found the woman, but not the child. She could not understand why.

She sensed the spirit of the other child, hungry for release.

“Rabbit?”

He shook his head, confused. Was Rabbit not with her?

She pushed past him to Second Stolen. The girl was squatting by the fire. The Woman could smell what was boiling in the pot. The lungs, the kidneys, the liver.

“Find Rabbit,” she said to the girl. “Eartheater is dead. Find Rabbit.”

Second Stolen glanced down into the pot. That Eartheater was her daughter and was dead held no interest for her. She was hungry for the rest of her kill. The Woman knew this.

“*Now*,” she said.

She watched Second Stolen rise and step past the man at the entrance.

The man did not respond or even raise his head.

“Wait,” she said.

She walked over to her and handed her the gun that had killed Eartheater in the woods and saw her face change, saw the sullen look disappear as this privilege became clear to her. The Woman knew that

First Stolen watched and would be angry.

It didn't matter.

First Stolen would be angry because she had brought the man here, too—the wolf—who looked up from his exhaustion now with eyes that only incompletely masked his hate and fear of her.

“Steven!”

The voice was a hoarse whisper, filled with pain.

She saw his eyes shift to the woman on the floor. And in them, recognition.

Nothing since he'd run from the police seemed exactly real to Steven. The shadowy woman behind him in the stream, the sudden detonation of pain and slack, broken uselessness of his ankle—and then her return, being helped almost considerately to this place by some scarred foul-smelling Amazon with a knife and a pair of pistols in her belt. . . .

This place.

This roost for chickens. This pigsty. Some goddamn armed medieval fortress. Hole in the wall.

An outhouse.

Hell, it was all of them.

And it didn't belong in the real world, he had dropped through some sick black filthy hole in space where human arms and legs dangled from the ceiling and the smell of something sweet and meaty in the pot mingled with the stink of shit and urine, where roaches the size of your fist scuttled across the floor across a naked baby sleeping on a filthy blanket and up the blackened legs of something with a penis chained to the back wall.

And in the midst of all this was your wife, beat to hell and being guarded by a pack of kids. The ultimate playground fantasy.

Let's get teacher.

"Steven!"

He could have killed her.

Jesus! The woman was a stupid bitch! You could bet the farm there was nothing to gain by acknowledging she knew him—and who knew what you stood to lose. Especially since it was pretty damn clear she was not exactly on their good side at the moment.

"Shut the fuck up, Claire," he said.

Temporarily at least that did the trick.

But the woman wasn't stupid—the woman had got the message, all right. She was looking at him, amused and curious.

But she wasn't asking. Not right away at least.

And now he saw Claire's old buddy, Amy, hugging her knees in the back of the cave, almost unrecognizable at first with all that blood smeared over her face, and he wondered where her husband David was.

Where Luke was.

Luke was a pain in the ass but he wasn't a bad kid, really.

He hoped he'd gotten away, actually.

And as for David . . . well, he hoped that David was out there too. For other reasons.

He wasn't being generous. They'd both had it in for him for a long time, David and Amy. The bastards. Loaning Claire money for a lawyer, to pay her bills, whatever. He couldn't feel too bad for either of them if they dropped dead on the spot but the fact was that they were still *like* him, they were civilized people who at least were not living in a shit pile with bones and dead bodies lying around in a goddamn

fucking cave. You could reason with them, you could get *around* them.

But *these* people . . .

Maybe David would get to the police.

Jail didn't seem so bad right now. Not even on Murder One.

At least there were people inside.

But *these* fuckers . . .

These fuckers scared him.

Like this girl, here.

She was what? maybe ten or eleven years old and she was peeling off the skin she was wearing, unwrapping it and dropping it as she walked back to the guy in the rear of the cave, then grabbing a knife and poking him, cutting him until the guy started to shriek, high-pitched like the girl herself might shriek if she were the one getting jabbed with the thing, little rivulets of blood flowing—and this kid is fucking *laughing*. Amusing herself! And nobody else is paying any attention to them at all except for the baby, who is all of a sudden wailing.

And Marion said *he* was sick sometimes.

At least when he did what he did he had some

reason for it. Some damn thing to be gained.
Otherwise it was just craziness, wasn't it?
It wasn't human.

So like it or not what he had here were a couple of allies in Claire and Amy. People he knew. People whose strengths and weaknesses he could depend upon. Even if they were beat all to hell they might still serve as allies in a way. They could help him get by.
There was only one thing to do with your allies.
You used them.

Amy heard the baby cry and looked up angrily, instinctively at the man in chains and the girl who tormented him. Their noise had disturbed the baby, released its voice—sounds of hunger and distress that caused her breasts to ache again and her heart to pound, wishing for Melissa. She saw that the girl had somehow anticipated her, was already watching her, something dreamy and removed in her eyes yet calculating too, as though she were staring down the short dead-end road of her imagination and trying hard to see farther.

The girl smiled and tossed away the knife and watched his body fall back exhausted against the wall of the cave.

She turned to Amy. She stared for a moment and then turned away.

She walked over to the baby.

And she knew *before she actually knew* what the girl was going to do—her entire body said *no* to this—she knew because the baby was crying loudly and the baby's mother was gone, sent away out of the cave, and she, Amy, was there instead with breasts filled with milk aching to betray her and to betray Melissa.

She shook her head *no* and felt a deep anxious churning inside her as the girl dropped the screaming baby into her arms, into her lap, and the baby clutched her breast through the open robe and took it in a mouth smeared with drool, crusted with dirt, and bit and sucked, pulled deep, its eyes a cold fixed squint that reminded her of the eyes of snakes, its tiny jaws fierce, pulling, grinding, sucking not just milk but the strength and life from her and racking her body with sobs.

She held the baby and cried and felt its pull like the tide, the surge of life. Violent, strange.

Greedy.

Rabbit crouched, poised in the blackberry brambles, the pupils of his eyes widely dilated, watching the rabbit forage for food.

It was not the berries the rabbit was interested in but the tender leaves and shoots, gray in the moonlight. Unaware and upwind, it was moving closer to him all the time. In a moment it would be within striking distance. He would flick his finger, a tiny movement. The rabbit would hear. And then it would only be a matter of which way the rabbit would jump. The rabbit would give away its intent, tilt its narrow head to the right or to the left in that split second before its hind legs gripped and pushed, and by then Rabbit's arms would be there, avoiding the powerful hind legs, ready to grip the ears and upper body and twist its neck.

He had hunted these brambles many times at night and most often he was successful. They formed a thicket on top the cliff high above and to the right of

the cave—well away from the easier, more traveled path the others took. But the others were not the hunter Rabbit was. They had never troubled to find this place.

He had brought Eartheater and the Girl here once, but neither could be content just to sit and watch and wait. They had made fun of him, of his grin, of his patient crouch. They made so much noise that no game would dare appear, not even a stupid squirrel. He had waited all night long after they left and returned with nothing.

He wouldn't make the mistake of asking them again.

He remembered that he could not ask Eartheater again, not even if he wanted to. Her body lay a few yards behind him hidden in the bushes beside the trail. He had been here for a while watching the rabbit, though he had only intended to stop for a moment just to see what was here, and he had not wanted the stink of death to frighten any game nearby so he had left it there, covered by sticks and tall grass to cut the scent. He knew it was much later now but he had little sense of time and the rabbit

was near.

He felt immensely happy here amid the berries and their cane-like, thorny stems, smelling the woods smell and the rabbit's hide, his feet dug into the earth and his weight distributed between hands and feet to give him balance and the fastest possible lunge. He knew exactly how far his spring would take him, in which direction the brambles would get in his way, and in which direction they would impede the leap of the rabbit. He knew the firmness of the ground, where it was soft and where it was stony, and waited for the rabbit to arrive at exactly the spot that was most to his advantage. These variables were not considered, they were calculated plus or minus in the flesh—in the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands, in his eye and ear. They ran in his blood.

And the moment was almost on him when the rabbit started, nose twitching as it sniffed the air, and the boy heard behind him faraway heavy footfalls along the path, and heard a man panting. He knew from the sounds that it was not one of his kind. He remembered Earth eater's body in the brush and heard the man stop for a long moment and knew that

he had found her. Knew that he had delayed here far too long.

He saw the legs of the man pass by as he searched the path near the cliff and as the rabbit ran off deep into the brambles.

He heard him stop at the very edge of the cliff and then return to retrace his steps. He smelled the man and recalled the smell, knew it for the smell of death because he had killed the man only a while ago with his knife.

And yet he walked.

He huddled shaking in the thicket, a Rabbit in truth now for the very first time, shuddering, frozen in fear, while the ghost went slowly down the mountain.

Through waves of throbbing pain Claire watched the tall scarred woman kneel down to Steven and search his eyes, studying him, her head tilted like an animal's, inquisitive.

Like a cat's.

She was aware of the twins and the boy with the clouded eye looking to the man for instructions, anxious for permission, probably, to go on kicking

her and beating her again. She was aware of their mouths and what was in them. Very aware. But the man was watching Steven too, ignoring them.

She was aware of Amy crying.

She saw a roach crawl to the top of one of the rocks banking the fire and fall in, overcome by heat, crackling.

But mostly she was aware of the woman.

She could feel something in this woman that was missing in the others. She sensed it powerfully. A thoroughly dangerous oneness, a wholeness with what she was, like a tiger or panther feeding—a total concentration of energy that was completely *of the animal*, intent and undistractable.

The woman leaned close.

She saw that Steven could not even meet her eyes.

“The baby,” she said.

There was ferocity in the question. There was blood. Claire felt it like a cold blast of wind.

Steven looked puzzled.

“Hers,” said the woman quietly. She pointed to the back of the cave.

And now he understood.

"I don't know," he said.

And she could see that not knowing scared him.

She watched him look away from the woman, considering, and then after a while look back at her. Not once did the woman's eyes blink or waver, though Steven's roamed the walls, the fire, the ceiling, lingered for a moment on the twin boys and the one with the clouded eye, and even—however briefly—on Claire. But now when they returned to the woman Claire knew he had arrived at something, at some decision, he could meet the woman's gaze now, if only for a moment.

She had seen that look before.

And she didn't know which of them—Steven or the woman—was more to be feared.

He glanced at the boys again. At their smiling open mouths.

"I don't know," he said. "But I think you can find out."

He looked at Claire.

"She doesn't like," he said, "to be bitten."

12:25 A.M.

Claire stared at him in shock.

The man had been her husband.

They had made love night after night and it had been good, once, she had believed it was good.

They had made a baby together, had considered having another.

They had skied in Vermont and weekendened at the shore.

She doesn't like to be bitten.

Claire heard the words. It was still nearly impossible to believe he'd said them—dead calm and dead serious, as though it were not her life and maybe Luke's he was talking about, as though he were simply making a suggestion to a client who had a certain problem and this was the solution which, after due consideration of the variables, he'd come up with.

He nodded toward the boys. "You have all you need," he said, "right here."

So this is who you are, thought Claire.

Beneath the panic, she hated him.

You know too much, damn you. About me, about the situation. And you have no soul. You will betray anything.

He knew that Luke was out there somewhere, the only one they hadn't found yet.

He knew that Claire would never have abandoned Amy's baby.

So the baby was with Luke. And probably, Claire knew where.

He was suggesting that they find Melissa through Luke, and Luke through her. He was suggesting pain. That pain would result in betrayal.

Of his son.

She doesn't like to be bitten.

Simple fact.

Almost ludicrous.

And true enough about Claire in its mundane, everyday way to be almost elemental, almost monstrous.

She didn't like to be tickled either god knows or touched on the soles of her feet or the taste of raw

onions or rainy winter days or the smell of whiskey or of gasoline at the pump. These were just facts about her. Items in the catalog of her personality. Amy knew them. David knew them. Luke knew them.

Yet this one went deeper, drew on a confidence shared with him and few others that in some ways defined the physical limits of her power over fear, and her moral courage in the face of it.

It was not onions or whiskey. It was horror. It went to the heart of her knowledge of herself. And he had given it over as casually as if he'd been asked about the color of her hair.

Who is worse? she thought. *Which one? The man who reveals the secret or the woman who would use it against her?* Because she had no doubt that the woman would use it. The woman was staring at the boys—and the boys had reminded Steven in the first place.

They had kicked her but their feet were bare thank god because there was pain but the damage was not too bad, not compared to the man's pain where she had kicked him, and he had rolled off the floor and groaned, telling them to stop.

They obeyed, walking away from her to the side of the cave, the boy with the clouded eye rummaging through a pile and handing to the others two sets of jagged teeth cut roughly from the sides of soda cans and keeping one for himself, placing it in his mouth so that the rounded rim of the can slid up between his lips and upper gums and the sharp teeth pointed down.

They had stood over her, mouths open, the tang of aluminum making them drool down over their chins. Waiting. For the man to allow them.

The woman stood in front of her and reached for her, hauled her to her feet as easily as though she were an empty sack, her rough hands abrasive beneath her arms, stood her up and pushed her against the wall.

"Say," she said.

The eyes bored into her, the breath raw as old meat, the smooth scar livid against her gray pallor.

The man stood behind her in the shadows. Smiling.

His teeth too. Rotted brown and black and filed to sharp points.

The children moved closer.

She felt the room begin to spin, her pores opening and the smell of her own sweat coming off her all at once and her stomach turned, it was as though she had drunk too much, she was going to be sick all over the woman and then the woman would kill her and maybe that was for the best, she wouldn't have to tell, she wouldn't have to say.

"Say," the woman repeated.

She saw teeth and fire and the bright scar, and for a moment couldn't have told her if she'd wanted to. The room slid into white light and the wet surface of a dimly lit suburban Boston street when she was ten years old. It was dusk and she was visiting her cousin Barbara and they and her cousin's friends were playing hide-and-seek and she was it and she had found the others but she couldn't find Barbara so she crawled under the cyclone fence to the neighbors' yard where the bushes against the fence made it shadowy and scary, a good place for her cousin to hide, being careful not to dirty her short dress, but Barbara wasn't there either so she turned to go under the fence again because she didn't like

being there in the shadows, when a dog appeared from around the side of the house, a big dog, old and black, and she could tell by looking at him standing there that he was going to bite. There was something in his eyes.

She had heard that an animal would attack if you moved so she didn't, she stood still, hoping it would just go away but the animal held her with its stare—there was something wrong with its eyes, a thin ugly film like the whites of eggs—and by the time the dog moved, trotting over to her, never letting go of her with its eyes, crazy looking, not like the eyes of any dog she'd ever seen, she was shaking and she had to go pee and the dog just stopped in front of her. Opened its mouth. And took the flesh of the front of her naked thigh into its warm wet jaws. Slowly, deliberately.

And bit down.

She half screamed and half cried and she couldn't help it, her leg moved back a little. The dog bit deeper, and there was blood rolling down her leg, a single warm stream.

The dog looked up into her eyes. Growled.

And bit harder.

She knew she was looking into the face of evil then, into the face and eyes of madness, of something that enjoyed her pain more than anything else its life could offer, and she wet herself and whimpered and suddenly a man's voice thundered off the porch and the dog let go and ran, and she ran, screaming—and when she got to the house and told her mother, her mother wanted her to go back to confront the man with what the dog had done but she was still too scared and she couldn't, her mother had to go get the man to show him.

The man was old. He was stooped and small. Much too small to have such a loud mean voice that would scare the dog that way. But then they heard the man later, shouting, something smashing against the walls, and the dog yelping wildly.

"Say," said the woman.

"I don't know," she said. "I swear I don't."

The woman looked at Steven. He shook his head.

The woman's hands tightened on her arms, the

jagged nails digging in.

“All right. The house. I told Luke to go back to the house if anything . . . if anything happened to me. To take Melissa with him and go back to the house right away.”

Steven smiled. *He knows me too well*, she thought, goddamn him. He could always tell.

“The truth, Claire,” he said. “Go on. Tell her.”

I can't do this, she thought.

There was only one place where she thought Luke might be and that was the treehouse. It was just as possible he wasn't there—he could be *anywhere*, even safe by now—but if there was one place more likely than any other it was the treehouse. He'd found it. He'd felt secure enough there to show her so they could hide.

I can't do this, she thought. *I can't risk it. I can't let them know.*

The woman saw her refusal, read her clearly, put the palm of her hand against her breastbone and slammed her against the wall. The woman's hands went to her shoulders, bunching the fabric of the wide neck of her dress in her hands, and tore it off

her shoulders. She reached down for Claire's wrists and dragged her in front of the fire and threw her down again, the skin of her hands and knees scraping off on the hard stone floor, her naked breasts suddenly cold against its clammy touch.

The woman stepped over her, put her foot in the small of her back and tore away the cotton briefs.

Hands grasped her arms and legs and rolled her over.

Hands held her, spread her arms and legs wide and she fought them but she was weak, faces with Halloween fangs leaned over her and she looked into those faces at those fangs and was suddenly as weak as the dog had made her so very long ago, she cried and screamed and no one stopped her but no one comforted her either as her mother had comforted her and the faces leaned down, slowly, mouths opening, leaning closer, and she felt the first flesh tearing in the hot mouth of the boy with the clouded eye holding her ankle, felt them sear into her calf and saw that the girl was holding her other ankle and that she too had teeth now, and then felt the slow incisions on each side of her in the tender webbing

of flesh that joined shoulder to breast above each armpit before the girl's teeth sank into her thigh above her knee, the flaming pain from all four points scorching up and through her.

She felt their tongues lap and the cool spill of saliva and blood, and heard them swallow.

She screamed and thrashed her head as the jaws worked side to side.

She screamed for Steven. She screamed for god. She did not know what she screamed.

And then there was only the man—the man and her terrible sudden impossible knowledge of what he meant to do as she looked down over her body and felt his hands grip her thighs and pull himself toward her through her open legs, using her own bruised flesh as purchase, crawling along on his belly as slowly as a snake gliding toward her, his mouth open wide, saliva dripping from his teeth and head lowering, the humid heat of his breath over her as he sought her inches away.

I'm sorry, Luke, she thought. I'm not going to tell them but I'm not going to be here for you either, anymore. I'm sorry, I'm very sorry.

She closed her eyes as the mouth descended.

They met at the base of the cliff—and Peters was just coming off the rock face into the sand thinking *the legs are the first to go* when the girl stepped out from behind the brush, the police-issue .38 pointed at him, and he took it in.

He wobbled and stumbled but he took it in.

The girl had no experience with a gun; she held it in front of her straight-arm like a kid in the general direction of his body, aiming at mass, not target. She was certain to jerk the trigger and keep on jerking it, and that was what she did.

So that the stumble worked for him—the stumble was a goddamn blessing. He hit his knees and righted himself and took the position as the first bullet kicked sand and seashells to the left of him and fired as the second bullet whizzed past his head. The third went straight to the stars because his own shot had taken her in the chest by then, and the girl went down not four feet away from him and got right up again like some cardboard duck in a shooting gallery but she'd lost control of the trigger, her finger

was trying to find it when he fired point-blank into her chest again and put her down.

The gun sailed away into the sand. Peters got to his feet and walked over.

He looked down at her and shook his head.

Because it was the same as eleven years ago in away.

Faced with the kind of slaughter the like of which he'd never seen or ever dreamed of seeing, it still wasn't so much the killing that got to him—except for the boy, because the boy was his fault, his problem—as it was knowing who and what these people were. Like some other species entirely, one that had evolved along parallel lines maybe, but whose ancestors in the Pleistocene or whenever the hell they'd done their evolving were not *his* ancestors or those of anybody he'd ever heard of, had taken a turn that was impossible for him to understand. He knew it wasn't true, that there were guys like Manson and Bundy out there too. But he had never met them either, and if he lived to be a hundred he would never understand.

He would never understand.

He watched her lying there, the last of her life draining out into the sand, her pale hands quivering, moving up over her body until her fingers found the entrance wounds beneath the dirty, bloody shirt.

And then weakly, *probing*.

And the goddamn girl was smiling.

Second Stolen lay bathed in the warm wet pleasure that was pain.

She remembered, long ago, a man who was dressed very much like this man who stood over her now, who was heavy like this man. And more dimly, she remembered the woman who was his mate. A thin worn face in contrast to the man's heavy face, with eyes that were mild and perhaps a little distracted, a little hurt and empty, but were not at all like the man's pig eyes, who did not have the man's heavy calloused hands, the hands that probed and beat her.

She smiled, remembering how she had escaped the man, how the Woman had come into her room in the night and taken her.

The Woman was young then. Second Stolen was

just a child.

She had not understood. She had cried and cried and the Woman had left her in the dark.

Sensation entered her more deeply than it did the others.

Her fingers could feel the heat inside her, the warm wet life, the smooth pulsing. The familiar pain that told her who she was.

Slowly, the memory faded.

The ghost had led him here for this.

To watch them below, to hear and smell the gunfire and watch Second Stolen fall.

To demonstrate its power by making him follow. And see.

He had imagined the idea was his own.

Rabbit hid in the shadows behind a ledge of rock and saw the man's ghost stand over her, reach down and touch the base of her throat and then move on lumbering like a bear across the sand in the direction of the cave and thought, *He has gone to hunt them all.*

All of them.

It did not occur to him as strange that a ghost should use a gun or breathe so heavily.

He only felt panic at the *lure* of the ghost—strong enough to bring him here, to bring Second Stolen from out of the safety of the cave so it could kill her, as quickly as a snake striking a rabbit.

He turned and scrambled up the rock face.

He did not use the path the ghost had walked but ran instead through the woods, off the trail that bore its scent—and when he heard the voices of the men and realized that they were many, all coming toward him, all from the same direction yet spread wide across the hills, when he smelled them and the oil of their weapons, he could only hide again downwind in the thicket and hope that they would pass as the ghost had passed and leave him alone and free.

There was another, better place to hide if he could reach it. He and Eartheater and the Boy had used it often. Not far.

He could wait high above them all in safety.

He could watch from high above throughout the night and even the next day.

Not far.

"Here! Over here!"

Peters' gun was ready—but this just wasn't one of them.

This was a boy, just an ordinary boy, *like the one he had shot eleven years ago and no way was he going to make that mistake again*—a boy hunched in the tall grass at the base of the cliff, waving at him.

The boy was dirty and bloody, his face and hands scratched up bad, wearing wet pajamas and frantically waving, hissing at Peters in a bad excuse for a whisper and *that close* to crying.

The boy looked scared to death.

But he was alive.

Peters promised himself he was going to get to stay that way.

"Where are they?" he said.

The boy pointed. A slice of pure black in the rock above. A fissure.

A cave.

"Up there," the boy said.

It was going to be a hell of a climb. The wound in his side was leaking him away. Worse than he'd

thought.

"Who's with them?"

"My . . . my mom. And Amy, maybe. I think Amy."

"Who's Amy?"

"My mom's friend. Mrs. Halbard."

"You saw them?"

"I saw my mom. And I think . . . maybe . . ."

"Who, son?"

The boy looked confused.

". . . I think I saw my *father*," he said. "There was somebody else. It was later. There was a man with a woman, and he was leaning on her and they were going up and it looked like . . . but my father's in his apartment in New York I think so it couldn't . . . I don't . . ."

And he realized the kid had followed them. Then stayed there to keep an eye on the place. That meant he was looking at a pretty determined, pretty resourceful, pretty resilient kid. He was shaking like a leaf. It wasn't his wet clothes. Peters didn't blame him.

The boy's confusion brought tears finally and

Peters was damn near glad to see them. Tears were normal. Tears were right.

He put his hand on the boy's shoulder and squatted down.

It hurt like hell but he did it anyway.

"That's real good work, son," he said. "Now listen. I'm going up there and I want you to stay right here out of sight and watch for me. You hide out right in this grass, okay? And if anybody comes along that doesn't look right to you, you stay where you are. You hide. You don't need to worry about me for a second. You don't need to warn me, you don't need to do anything but hide. I'll be fine. And if anybody comes along who looks like a policeman, you show 'em where I've got to. There are gonna be policemen coming and we're going to get everybody out of here in fine shape. Okay?"

The boy wiped his nose and nodded.

"Now we just met but I get the feeling you're a pretty brave guy," he said. "You hang in there and watch for those uniforms and I'll see you soon, okay? Go on, get down now."

The boy nodded again and his eyes were dry.

It was good, Peters thought, to give the kid a purpose.

Hell, up until last night he'd probably needed one himself.

There were entirely too many strangers around these days.

See you, Mary, he thought. He started up the rock face.

He was only a quarter of the way up when he heard the woman's screams.

12:35 A.M.

Amy heard Claire's screams, and they pitched her out of her deep tidal fog into the unsteady light of the cave.

She saw herself holding the thing at her breast, cradling it in her arms while it squeezed and sucked. Her nipple an angry red.

She wiped the thick congealed blood from her eyes and saw Claire on the floor writhing, struggling, the children leaning over her like the black shapes of bats, their elbows askew.

She heard lapping, feeding.

She saw Steven watching passively, and the woman standing over them.

And saw the man crawl forward between Claire's legs like some huge lumbering iguana, then raise his head and strike as suddenly Claire lurched to the side so that his teeth sunk into her inner thigh and the man began to shake, working free the flesh between his teeth while she screamed and pitched with all her strength, tearing free of the boy at her

right arm, his metal teeth lodged in her shoulder and the blood pouring down while the man threw back his head and opened his mouth and swallowed—*bolted her*—and suddenly she was Claire and Claire was Amy, and the thing at her breast was all of them.

She pulled herself up against the back wall of the cave and tore its mouth away, felt filaments of spittle cold against her breast, and thrust the screeching thing high above her head.

“*Stop! Stop it!*” she screamed. She felt the caked blood crack along her face.

“What are you, fucking *crazy?*”

Steven was by the fire, trying to stand, his leg going out from under him. “Amy, put it the hell *down* for chrissakes! You do that they’ll kill us!”

But they *had* stopped. They were off her.

Looking at Amy.

Even the man had stopped and turned.

“Kill us?” There was the urge to laugh. The urge to hysteria. “They’ll kill us anyway, Steven. Look at her. *Look* goddammit! Look at what they’ve done to your wife you stinking piece of *shit!*”

“I don’t have a wife.” He shrugged, looked at

Claire. "You mean this? Fuck it," he said.

The woman stepped forward.

"Don't!"

She raised the baby higher. It wriggled in her grasp. It wanted to get free. She felt a split second of guilt for using it this way, and the woman must have seen it in her eyes—something weakening for a moment, hesitant—because she took another step and the others were slowly rising too and there was nowhere to go, no cards to play but the baby.

Don't make me, she thought.

You don't know me—and you don't know me and Claire.

"Stay where you are," she said.

She was aware of Steven half crawling, half stumbling to the entrance to the cave and Claire rolling over on her side, weeping, as the others halted and then began to move again.

And it was slow, the tempo of a dream, a nightmare glide that brought them together as a pack, the children covered with Claire's blood, the man's chin glistening. She heard the *snick* of a knife pulled out of its sheath and saw it appear in the girl's

hand, saw a razor in the hand of one of the twins. She heard the rattle of chains and realized that she had edged nearer the naked man, was aware of him watching with interest and straining against his chains, grunting, caught fascinated in the wake of the wholly unfamiliar.

“Don’t,” she said.

The woman stopped, reached for the gun in her belt and Amy knew two things simultaneously—that it was exactly the gun she needed and that this was the single chance she’d ever get to try.

Forgive me, she thought.

And the baby seemed to know because it screamed as her hands tightened and her arms moved back. She threw it hard and blindly somewhere beyond the woman, somewhere into the pack and saw its limbs splay out, its body tumble as the woman whirled and the twins and the boy with the clouded eye reached for it and someone—the boy—caught it by one naked outstretched arm and pulled it roughly toward him.

The woman whirled again, snarling, but by then Amy was on her, diving clumsily into her midsection

because that was where the gun was, staggering her only slightly but groping, searching for the gun, tugging it out of her belt as the woman chopped her down with a fist, then rolling dazzled by the blow toward the fire and bringing the gun up and pointing it at where she was. Except the woman wasn't there anymore. She rolled and the woman was gone. The woman was on the far side of the cave picking up an ax, running toward her again and so was the man and the children and she didn't know where to shoot, they were all coming at her at once so she just pulled and pulled the trigger.

The echoes pounded through the cave and she saw the man reach out for her and sway as the bullets impacted his chest like thrown mud, flesh and blood splattering the girl beside him. One of the twins had fallen, clutching his knee. The man lurched forward and she fired again and suddenly the gun was empty, the hammer falling on empty chambers as the woman raised her arms and the man gripped the sleeve of her robe and then its collar with his dripping bloody hands and bent her back, turning her, presenting her body to the woman and the ax.

There was poetry in here somewhere.

Peters recognized him instantly. Muddy suit and all.

The man looked pretty shocked, though, seeing Peters.

He was wasting neither words nor bullets by then.

He just let the man have it with the butt end of the .38 and watched him crumble.

He was walking a deer-path ledge fifteen feet from the crease in the rock that the boy had said was the entrance to the cave. It was right in front of him.

I'm going in again, Mary, he thought. Just like eleven years ago. Just like the night they got Caggiano, and I got the boy.

This is what kept us up all those nights.

This is what you had to suffer through just in order to stay with me.

You wish me luck, Mary. You give me a hand here.

Maybe this time, I'll get it right.

He was a few steps back when somebody inside opened fire and he didn't wait for it to finish. He just

stepped on in.

The pain was brittle.

Each blast of gunfire seemed to fracture a bone in Claire.

She had been trying to rise when the man walked in. The pain almost sat her down again.

But she watched him pick his shots.

He seemed to size up everything in an instant, stepping around her, near her, crouching, the waves of tension pouring off him flooding her with a wild new joy of her own, that finally the nightmare was for *them*, not for Claire and Amy—for *them!*—and when he fired and she saw the man's eye disappear, saw Amy drop from his grasp, saw the wide black hole where the eye was and saw his head jerk back and the gleaming wet wall behind him, she watched him fall and had all she could do to keep her hands off this grim old man with the gun, all she could do to not embrace him.

Amy was on her hands and knees. He fired again. The woman went down spinning beside her, the ax clattering against the wall.

He fired again as the boy with the clouded eye leaped across the fire. The children were everywhere now, scattered, moving fast. Even the twin with the shattered knee was dragging himself across the floor, slicing the air with his razor. And the man would have hit the boy, she thought, had not the boy's foot caught the handle of the pot boiling on the fire so that he twisted in midair, fell beneath the bullet's path, his left leg kicking up the flames and showering them with sparks.

The pot spilled across the floor, steaming. Gray broth scalded the soles of her feet.

She pulled herself up and away, standing, shaking. As David's lungs and kidneys disgorged themselves from the pot in front of her and the man fired once again.

The leg of the boy's pants was going up in flames but he didn't notice, he didn't care, the knife was raised and he lunged as the man fired point-blank into his face. She turned so as not to see and glimpsed Amy on her feet, staggering toward her—and between them the crippled twin with the razor, the one whose knee Amy's bullet had smashed.

Dragging the leg, trying to reach them.

The man shot again and she turned in time to see the second twin fall in a heap against the wall of the cave, but saw too that the man had not escaped him, saw the knife protruding from his shoulder as the girl lurched forward and stabbed him in the chest, twisting the knife one long agonizing moment and sinking it deeper until he managed to lift the gun and fire directly into her ear.

He fell to his knees, clutching the girl's long blade, too weak to pull it away. His face was covered with her blood.

He looked over at Claire and she saw the warning in his eyes a split second before he toppled forward.

She whirled and felt something slash her arm—hot, almost painless—and saw the crippled twin raise his arm to strike a second time and Amy suddenly behind him, reaching into his dirty matted hair, her full weight pushing him forward facedown into the dense-packed embers beside her.

The boy struggled, sparks flying, his hair bursting into flame, and Claire *felt* Amy's hands burning too, felt it as though her own were burning but she

wouldn't let go, she held him—it felt like they *both* were holding him—until the boy's screaming struggles stopped and his face lay sizzling in the fire like charring meat.

Claire lifted her up.

But for the sounds from the fire and the rattle of chains the cave was silent.

From somewhere in the shadows she heard the baby cry.

Tears and the black residue of greasy smoke streaked Amy's face. Her hands were black where they were not burned white. She held them helplessly out in front of her.

"It's all right," Claire said. "It's over."

She looked at the man who had saved them, his hands still gripping the handle of the knife. His eyes were motionless, half-open. She couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

She felt a pang of loss, of something almost like love for the man. The man was a total stranger. Among them for a matter of moments. She felt it anyway. That somehow his being here wasn't by accident, that some deeply human impulse had

drawn him here to help them. And maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe they could still return the favor.

"We've got to get out of here," she said. "We've got to find someone."

There was a pile of blankets behind her. She took one for herself and one for Amy. The blankets were crusted hard and smelled of urine but both of them were trembling uncontrollably and she knew enough to cover them to guard against shock.

The wound in her thigh was a constant agony and she was walking in her own streaming blood. For a while she had almost forgotten the wound.

She wrapped the blankets around them.

"Come on," she said.

In the fire the boy's face popped and sizzled.

They walked out into the warm moonlit night.

She saw Steven lying on the path a few feet from the entrance to the cave.

She felt nothing at all on seeing him there, not even any curiosity as to whether he was dead or alive. She felt more for the man lying stabbed and bleeding inside.

Steven belonged with the dead now. In more ways

than one.

Not Amy, though, she thought, and hugged her tighter. *And not me. And not that man inside.*

And when she heard Luke's voice down the mountain—his bad stage whisper, and the men's deeper voices hushing him—she felt something soar out of her like a nesting gull, and knew that what she lacked time would somehow endow again, and it was almost possible to smile.

12:45 A.M.

Do not try to escape the wound, thought the Woman. Make it welcome.

The trick had been taught to her far more years ago than she could remember. Once before it had saved her life—and it had always made her impervious to pain.

She took the wound into her—even locating and including the bullet that lay pressed to the back of her seventh rib—surrounded it, encompassed it. Until the invaded flesh was no more or less consequential to her than a fingernail or a follicle of hair.

And finally was able to rise.

She stood, the damp air thick with the smell of gunfire, and calmly surveyed the cave.

The children were dead.

First Stolen, dead.

She would have to begin again.

She kicked the fat man twice in the belly and saw the last of the breath in him huff out between his lips with the first sharp blow.

She looked down into his face as she had before on the path and knew him again, knew that whoever he was, this man had once inhabited her dreams.

Perhaps he would again, and perhaps the next time she would understand why.

The women, her captives, were gone. She would have to hurry.

The knife was secure in the back of her belt.

She stripped off the bloody shirt and gathered up Second Stolen's child squalling on the floor. At her touch the child went suddenly quiet.

For a moment she noticed its eyes.

Its eyes unnerved her. As though they understood her intent, and approved. Not the eyes of an infant. The eyes had wisdom.

Power.

She wrapped the shirt around it and tied the bottom corners together between its legs, then knotted the arms and slipped them over her head so that the baby hung pressed with its belly to her back behind her shoulders in a makeshift harness, riding high enough so that she could quickly get to the knife. The baby's tiny fingers flexed against her

naked back as though seeking purchase in the Woman's flesh, opening and closing against her.

She walked quickly to the back of the cave.

She felt a chill. The body of the other infant, the one who had brought this upon them, lay leaning against the wall in the white plastic garbage bag to the right of the Cow. She could see the side of his face and one shoulder pressed straining into the bag, as though the infant were trying to break free.

Its spirit unreleased.

She had failed in this.

There was no hope for release now but she could still set its vengeance far away from her at least, she could set it into the drifts and deeps of the sea.

She picked up the bag, twisted it, and tied it into her belt.

She reached into the rusted yellow coffee can beside the Cow and found his tethers and his key. She removed the chains and left them dangling. She could find other chains. But the Cow could not be left behind. The Cow was necessary in order to begin again.

She tied the strong gut lines around his wrists,

took the lines in one hand and the ax in the other and walked him to the entrance to the cave. Ordinarily she would have walked him backward—his wrists tied behind his back. The Cow had become very adept at walking backward, and it was amusing to watch him stumble. But the trail was narrow and she had no wish to lose him down the mountain or be delayed by his stumbling.

Outside the wind shifted and she smelled salt and tide off the sea. She heard voices. Whispers.

Not yet to the entrance, but close by.

She jerked at the tethers. The Cow grunted and trudged forward.

Outside she listened. She heard footsteps from below. But the path above them was clear.

The warm night air laved the wound at her side. The Cow shuffled to a halt behind her.

The man was sitting dazed in the path a few feet away. He looked up as they approached and removed his hand from the side of his head. The hand came away bloody.

She allowed herself a moment of regret. The man had been useful to her in a small way. Given time, he

might have been much more so. She had known the wolf in him would turn ruthless in its own interests, in its own defense.

But the wolf was crippled, unable to escape the voices on the mountain.

It did not seem to know this. It held its hands palms upward to her in supplication and shook its head as it stared into the impassive mask of her face and tried to rise. It whimpered.

Perhaps it sensed her intention. Or perhaps it wished simply not to be left behind.

In either case this was only a man now—the wolf in him had fled.

The wolf was on the wind.

So that it was a kindness to the man to swing the ax, to break swiftly and cleanly through the ear and skull, to send half the skull sailing out into the night down the cliffside to the sand below. She watched the body stir, still sitting, as it slowly began to fall and smelled the sudden metallic smell of blood, tantalizing, intoxicating in the salt air.

The wound in her side wanted feeding.

She realized suddenly that her entire body did. It

had been many hours since the kill and feast of the night before, might be many more till it fed again.

She must act quickly.

The steep upward incline would hinder those below for another moment yet.

She caught the shoulders as they fell and brought the body upright, bent over and set her mouth to the broken lip of the skull and drank deep of the blood and fluid that drooled across the rim—rich, thick, salty—her hands holding the neck and chin to steady him, drinking from the still-warm cup of him, intent on this as the child began to wriggle in its makeshift harness and the Cow reached into the back of her belt and silently withdrew the knife.

The Cow stared into the open palm of his hand as though the knife had appeared by magic, not his own volition—as though some miracle had got it there.

In eight years he had seen so many. Knives for skinning and for scraping the skins, for cutting and sectioning meat, and then for feeding. For sharpening sticks or bones like the ones they used to torment him. He had seen knives heated to

cauterize wounds or to dig for parasites. Used for killings of animals and men—fast and slow.

Yet he had never held one.

The years in chains had made him weak—all but one organ. And that was rising now as his hand closed over the carved bone handle and the Woman fed.

An image came to him of a man huddled for what must have been weeks in a dark narrow crevice, sealed off from all light and where it was impossible to stand or even kneel, living off the insects that crawled through his feces and the occasional scrap of meat that emerged from the sudden blinding light.

The man had a name. Frederick. He could not remember the rest.

But the Woman had put him there, and the Woman had delivered him.

And by then he was the Cow.

All the years in chains had made him weak. But not so weak that he could not take the knife in both hands now and drive it into her back, dimly aware of the child only inches from his hands struggling to crawl free of its harness, pushing forward on the

knife with all the miserable weight of his flesh and bone, his erection driving too against the smoothness of her thigh in the most pleasurable sensation of his life.

He squealed, grinning, as she strangled him.

She shook him like a rag doll and soon his tongue protruded but he would not die, the light in his eyes seemed filled with pleasure and it would not go out, and she marveled that the power of the spirit of the dead infant was such that it had caused even this, had first torn the very structure of her world away from her and now even its sense, so that it was hardly even a surprise to her when the guns sounded and her flesh exploded in a dozen places and plunged them both spinning down the mountain.

And the last thing she was aware of was Second Stolen's child torn away from her by the bullets' impact and its eyes, gazing coldly at her and then into the empty night as it fell away. Unafraid.

A huntress.

12:55 A.M.

Rabbit climbed the tree to the platform.

He had waited until the woods were silent, until the men in the woods had passed by and he could hear their feet scuffling on the rocks below. And then he had waited further just to make certain and because he was still afraid.

He was moving through the brush when he heard the guns. So many guns. Then nothing.

He was sure his people were dead.

The important thing now was to stay hidden.

He was Rabbit. Alone now. Learning to be Fox.

He climbed cautiously, his knife between his teeth, aware of unfamiliar scents from above. Not his. Not Eartheater's or the Boy's.

In the stillness they drifted down to him on slow currents of air. It was almost as though they were visible.

He smelled fear.

Faint, distant. A residue.

But pleasing to him.

He smelled *innocence*—the blind security of hatchlings asleep in their nest.

He raised himself up, peered across the platform. His lips curled smiling off the blade.

It was what they had been seeking. Through all this night of amazements and destruction. And he, Rabbit, whom the others laughed at and would not listen to, whose smile had always been a sign for them that he was poorly made somehow, had found it. Asleep in a blanket where he had taken Eartheater and the Boy to play. His place.

He could almost miss them now. There was no one to witness his triumph.

He rolled onto the platform lightly as a breeze and lay there. The infant beside him slept on. Its mouth was open. Its eyes were closed. He leaned in closer. Its breath smelled sweet.

He parted the blanket that covered her legs. The infant was a female.

The Woman had said they must use the infant's blood to quench the spirit thirst of the dead child—and that this was for the good of all of them.

But there was no *all of them* now.

Only Rabbit.

He considered this.

In his mind he could taste its warm sweet blood.

And he could almost, but not quite, imagine the other. But time could make it real.

And he thought that the Woman would approve of his conclusion. That she would not think him quite so stupid after all.

The infant was female.

In her, in him, they could begin again.

He had only to wait and hunt and hide. Ten, eleven summers.

The Woman would approve.

He lay beneath a full moon darkened by clouds within the sound of the sea and claimed her.

He reached for the sleeping child, gathered her into his arms and she opened her eyes, knew who she belonged to now, then heard someone running, running hard toward the tree and a voice farther away call for the runner to stop. He listened to the footfalls and thought, *Older, yes, but only another*

innocent, the boy, though the voice was a man's voice and much more dangerous, and he crouched and drew the blade.

It wasn't like he felt like a hero or anything, but as soon as Luke got them near the treehouse he started getting excited.

It was as though in all this horrible stuff, with all this going on that made him want to cry and *did* make him cry—his mom and Amy coming hurt so bad down the mountain, the shooting on the mountain, *those people falling so close to where he was standing he could hear them hit like great big sacks of dirt and even the baby falling so that he couldn't look, he couldn't, he just hid behind the policeman*, then asking about his father and nobody answering and the awful sick smell of the blankets his mother wore as she held him, the way she cried, the blood on Amy's face—it was as though in all this awful terrible stuff there was one good thing at least. And that was that Melissa was safe. Melissa was all right.

And he was the one who knew *where* she was

because he had put her there. He felt good about that. So that when one of the policemen said okay show us and another said no wait, take care of these people here and we'll call it in and then we'll *all* go, he was glad his mom insisted that they find her right away, right now before something happened to her, that Luke should show them. He was glad even though it was hard to leave her and even though he thought, *What could happen?* These people, they were all dead, weren't they? And Melissa couldn't crawl yet. She couldn't crawl and hurt herself. His mom had said she was still too young for that.

So what could happen?

Animals, he thought.

Animals could get her. That scared him for a while. But he didn't really believe it.

Sure it was possible but it just didn't seem *right* somehow, to have gotten her all this way hidden real well and then have some animal get her. He didn't believe it at all, he *wouldn't* believe it and as he took the group of policemen up the cliff with him the scared feeling went away and he started to feel pretty good. His mom was safe. He was safe. And

Melissa was going to be safe, too.

So he was excited when they got to the treehouse—not some hero, but excited.

And he didn't really listen when the officer told him to stop.

"Up here!" he said.

And ran out ahead.

He climbed the steps as fast as he could.

And the policemen were behind him but they were adults and a whole lot slower and had a whole lot less to be excited about, so they hadn't even got to the ladder yet when he was up, his head over the top of the platform and he was grinning, he could hardly wait to see Melissa there . . . when this dark sudden shape of something in front of him hissed and rushed forward, and even before he saw the glint of the knife he lost his footing and cried out and started to fall.

He twisted sideways, trying to hold on to the railing with one arm and flailing with the other and the knife darted past his head. He heard the railing crack as the boy leaned over and tried to stab him but he was still dangling, swinging, trying to grasp hold of

something, *anything* solid with his free right hand—and what he found was the wrist with the knife.

He found it by mistake. But he didn't let go because the knife couldn't cut him that way and something told him to *pull* so he did pull and that part of the railing the boy was leaning over cracked again—and suddenly the boy let go of the knife, it tumbled away, and grabbed *his* wrist instead as he broke through the railing and fell, held on to his wrist as he fell the length of him and with his other hand grabbed his leg.

And started to *climb* him.

Agony shot through his arm on the railing. But his feet had found the ladder or else they'd both have fallen.

Luke had never seen a boy so strong and an instant later they were face-to-face. A face so dirty the dirt seemed a part of him.

The boy's breath was hot and it stunk and he was smiling. He saw crazy eyes and twisted brown-black teeth.

The boy had let go of his wrist and had him by the shoulders. He looked up and around and Luke saw

what he meant to do, he was going to pull himself up over Luke's shoulders onto the platform and then up the tree, maybe into the next tree then and over and he might even make it in the darkness, it would be hard for the policemen to see.

He heard Melissa crying and thought, *What if he takes Melissa so they can't fire. And then what if he falls?* And in the instant that the boy lifted his hand off Luke's shoulder he got so suddenly mad at him, at all of them and maybe at everybody in the whole damn world who hurt people who never *deserved* to be hurt that he swung his elbow as hard as he could into the middle of the boy's ribs.

As fast as the boy had appeared he was gone.

Faster.

One minute he was there and the next he wasn't. He didn't even scream.

Luke didn't look down.

He didn't need to know if the boy was dead. He could tell by the sound. The sound was the same as the people falling off the rocks.

He didn't like the sound, but he wasn't afraid of it either. Not anymore.

His legs were shaking but he managed the two more steps up to Melissa okay, and then just sat there trembling and breathing and gradually feeling okay again and thinking, *I really did this, I helped her, I maybe sort of even saved her*—feeling pretty good in fact, letting Melissa hold on to his finger, until the policeman came and got them out of there.

Melissa smiled at the policeman all the way down.

It would be nice, Luke thought as he came down the ladder, if his mom had a baby someday. Like Melissa.

You never knew. Maybe she'd meet some guy.

It would be nice, he thought.

If she didn't, of course, that would be okay too.

It was good to know it really didn't matter.

PART VI

MAY 13, 1992
MORNING

9:45 A.M.

Peters dreamed that he and Mary dove off a pier into the sea. They were holding hands. They were naked and their bodies were twenty years old, smooth and firm. The sun was warm. They were getting away from someone or something which they did not fear exactly but which troubled them, and that was why they dove into the sea.

They swam through gentle waves around a short promontory, found sand beneath their feet, and again holding hands, began to emerge from the water.

Suddenly the beach became the streets of town and Mary realized she was naked. People were going on about their business as usual, not staring, but Mary was a modest woman and Peters was aware of her discomfort at running around town as god made her. He regretted leaving their clothes behind. They hadn't even any money to buy some.

He resolved the problem by stopping, turning toward Mary and embracing her.

"Now they can't see," he said.

She laughed. "George! We're in the middle of the street."

"That's the point," he said. "If we stand here long enough somebody will notice what nice people we are and how in love we are and get us some clothes eventually. Right?"

"Right," she said, and hugged him back.

"It all turns out eventually," he said.

And woke up.

He saw the covers on his bed and his body lying under them and saw that it was possible to move his hands. He dealt with that in amazement for a moment. He saw the hospital room and the flowers. And the people by his bed.

A woman with a bandaged head, seated in a chair. Nursing a pretty little baby.

Holding hands with another woman sitting beside him on the bed. The woman wore a light blue hospital gown the same as he did, but the woman was smiling at him, the first to notice he was awake.

And a boy dressed in jeans and a T-shirt standing by the window, staring out into the

sunlight. The boy turned and glanced at Peters and then he smiled too.

With all these strangers around him smiling Peters had the god-damnedest urge to smile back at them.

And suddenly he remembered.

He looked over at the boy from the beach and remembered.

And then he did smile.

Hell, these weren't strangers.

They didn't *feel* like strangers.

"How'd I do?" he said.

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11:55 P.M.

Part V May 13, 1992 Night

12:00 Midnight

12:05 A.M.

12:12 A.M.

12:25 A.M.

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Part VI May 13, 1992 Morning

9:45 A.M.



TRAPPED INSIDE THE STOKER

BY
JACK KETCHUM

TRAPPED INSIDE THE STOKER

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I like this house. I really do.

Not to start out crass but what the hell, I like the fact that for one thing, I didn't have to pay for it. Except in the way you always have to pay for everything in some damn currency or another. Blood, sweat. Fears, years. The currency of sheer persistence.

But this time none of my own cash was involved for a change. Not a dime.

Which was lucky. What little cash I had at the time couldn't even have purchased the shrubs -- at least I *think* they're shrubs -- around the side.

The house was handed to me actually by a group of friends and admirers. Just like that. Right out of the blue. It's possible they were aware of my state of mind throughout the previous year and decided that the house would cheer me up. Be a welcome lift from a very bad patch financially speaking and a painful rejection by my British lover. Who had borne me four bastard sons by then. Or maybe five. But that's another story.

And it *was* a lift. It *did* cheer me up. I couldn't have been more delighted.

See, it's the house itself.

I like walking around inside here. The ancient solidity of the place, its strange angularity, its gables, peaks and chimneys, its garret with the small oculus window, the gargoyles poised above the threshold. The essential darkness within despite the big bay windows in back looking out on the blasted garden.

I've always found darkness very comforting. I'm a night person I guess. Daylight always comes as a kind of rude surprise to me. I prefer my dream-world to the crisp outlines of buildings against the sunlit sky, to the narrow flat lines of streets and the polished glare of the cars which glide along them. Prefer it even, I have to admit, to most of the people I know. The people who inhabit my dreams are almost always more interesting.

Plus they change faster.

So I'm very at home here. It's just my kind of place.

I have plenty of company to amuse me. I have a very large thousand-legger sort of insect thing which creeps back and forth through the second-floor window on the left side of the house into the master bedroom and then out again through the window in back. This goes on all night long. I don't mind.

I've cleared a good wide space for the thing so it doesn't smash the furniture in the process. I like the sound of its feet pattering paradiddles across the floor and windowsill like a tap dancer, its antennae delicately exploring the shutters. It never seems to stop to eat and I wouldn't know what to feed it.

It doesn't seem to have a mouth anyhow. At least none that I can see.

There's a turret on the second floor around to the right. Only one -- which is odd because usually they come in pairs. Apparently whoever designed the house favored some measure of asymmetry. In the open window of that turret a watcher stands guard, sharp of tooth and narrow of skull, his long cloak bunched around his wrists. Whether he's actually just standing guard there or waiting to leap down unexpectedly on anyone foolish enough to approach is an open question. I've never asked him.

The fangs could argue either way.

In the first floor parlor window are my bird-heads. Over half a dozen at least though it's hard to count them because they're extremely fast. And one or more is always darting out the window to climb the side of the house and bedevil the poor thousand-legger on its ceaseless second-floor rounds.

I call them bird-heads though others call them lizard-heads. I don't think it matters much either way. Think *Archeopteryx*. Though they do have long rows of very sharp teeth so we could all be mistaken and they might be something else entirely.

The back door's always opening and closing. Those rare occasions I used to go out to what passes for the garden I could see a huge pair of hands -- human hands -- opening and closing it incessantly. Though when I went back through that door, the passage to the kitchen was always empty. It's as though somebody were constantly just about to call me in

for lunch and then got to thinking better of it. Like maybe lunch was never quite ready.

Another mystery.

Finally there's the troll in the chimney.

From the yard you can just see the top of his head and maybe the bridge of his nose and deep-set eyes and pointy ears.

He looks like a chimney-stop but isn't.

Obviously I've never used that fireplace, that chimney. I use the one on the other side.

Which so far is clear.

I build all my fires there.

As I say, I have plenty of company. Company's not the problem.

The problem is that much as I like the house, I seem to be *trapped* here.

The house has gained a kind of *thickness*.

It's getting hard to move inside. Like moving through hardening plaster.

I can't make it to the back door passage anymore. I can hear the hands opening and closing the door but that's all. I can barely make it to the kitchen to cook myself a steak or pour myself a scotch. Both of which always seem to be there when I need them, thank god.

I've never been able to get out through the front door at all.

Nobody can get in either.

Here's why.

Say you're a visitor. You go to the paneled wooden door, grasp the handle, pull and it opens. But then what you're looking at is a *second* door. This one *without* a handle. Set directly into the thickening space of the house itself -- by what means I don't know. This second door's made of brass and carved with the inscription

1994

Superior

Achievement

Short

Fiction

"The Box"

in Cemetery Dance

JACK KETCHUM

So now I ask you, what the hell am I supposed to make of this?

How are my publishers going to find me? Or I find them? Not that they've ever come beating down my door in the first place. Which is maybe why I'm *here* in the first place. Why my friends and admirers have put me here, given me this space, allotted me this oddly safe-feeling haven on some side street apart from the *main*, in some quiet place away from the *stream* of things. Where I can live comfortably amid my crawly, climbing, watching, paradiddling friends.

There are others just like me, I know. In similar houses all across

the country.

Plenty of them.

And it's not that we don't like where we are. We do. And it's not that we're not grateful. We are. It's just that it gets strange and isolated here sometimes and the walls get thicker and thicker and the need to *break out* just grows and grows.

Maybe I will and maybe I won't.

Break out I mean.

We'll see.

Meantime while I still can, I think I'll build another fire.

It's what I do.

TRAPPED IN THE STOKER

by Jack Ketchum

-- for Theo Levine

DEATH TO HARINGA!

By Jack Ketchum

© 2008 Dallas Mayr

MARCH 7TH, 2008

I've about had it with Haringa. His strip clubs, his erudition, his goddamn smoking jacket -- who the fuck does he think he is, Hefner? His lovely wife Tomomi who won't introduce me to any of her Japanese girlfriends even though I've begged her repeatedly. *She knows your reputation*, he says. *She's heard about you*.

For fuck's sake!

Who am I, Hefner?

Add to that the fact that he's supposed to be editing a book of essays about my stuff which is probably twenty-five years late by now. Like he's waiting for me to die before he finishes it. Bigger sales that way.

The prick.

It only remains to be seen when and where. I'm taking him out. Him and his sorry-ass excuse for a goatee. That baby-face of his *still* can't grow a decent beard and he's what? pushing fifty? Fifty-five? Forty?

Who the hell knows.

He figures he brings me a cup of coffee now and then at NECON and I'm his buddy for life. I'll forgive all these offenses. Unh-unh. This calls for RETAL.

NECON!

That's it! That's the ticket.

I wonder if I can enlist Dan Booth in on this. It would be easier. Dan's got to have some beef with the guy.

Pretty much everybody does.

But I'd have to proceed carefully on that.

JULY 17TH

This is easier than I expected.

Haringa's a total lush when Tomomi's not around and he starts early. So it's a simple thing to invite him over for an early afternoon Dalmore single-malt and while he's going on and on about Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard -- who the fuck cares about Robert E. Howard? -- I spike his scotch. The drugs I got from Lynne Winter. Not many people know this but Lynne always has the best drugs.

Then comes the tough decision. Bash him or slit him. Linzner argues for bashing -- but he would. Monica can usually be trusted to be level-headed about these kinds of things and says that since we have to drain him anyway, drag him to the tub and slit him. So that's what we do.

It takes a while to drain him but we're patient. It's Haringa after all. You want to savor the moment. Then we cut off most of the tender bits. Ass -- bigger than I'd have thought, by the way, probably why he wears those slacks -- thighs, breast and oh yeah, those smooth fucking cheeks of his just beyond the little goatee.

The meat-grinder we got from Doug Winter, whose law firm bankrupted some poor Missouri pig-farmer a few months back. It's quiet and efficient.

I've got Dan Booth stuffing the meat into the washed and dried intestines. Dan's a meticulous guy and he likes his saugies so this job's absolutely meant for him.

When we're finished and Monica's washing her hands she calls out from the bathroom. What's left of Haringa's still in the tub -- he'll be crab-food in the bay tomorrow.

"You think we should say a few words over him?" she says.

"Sure," I tell her. "Haringa was a man of many words. A-fucking-men."

The saugies are a big hit.

Much better than last year, everybody says. Did we get a new butcher? If so we should definitely hold onto him.

I start thinking about '09.

Stan Wiater says he's a Ketchum "completist" but he never buys my books.

We'll see.

REMEMBERING CHARLIE

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So it's now the wee, wee hours of another NECON morning. The sun isn't up yet but it's not gonna be long now. Charlie Grant and I are in the quad, talking to a handful of young newcomers who are likely to outlast us quite easily, swigging their beers out there.

I've only just met Charlie that day and not without a little trepidation initially because I'm known for loud messy horror and he's the Keeper of Quiet and I figure he's naturally got to hate my stuff. But he's confessed early on that messy or not he liked my first book pretty damn well and went on to read more of me and I tell him I've been reading him ever since King recommended him in DANSE MACABRE. So we've got all that shit out of the way. By now, with the benefit of a libation or two, we're well on the way to becoming friends.

We're talking about the old days. Not the old writing days. We're talking about growing up. Turns out we're just about the same age, to which Charlie feigns indignation because while at this point I have not a gray hair on my head, Charlie already has plenty.

The conversation's between a bunch of guys so obviously it turns to sex. But in a good way. Charlie and I are waxing nostalgic, telling these kids what they've missed. Talking about high school innocence back in the late fifties, early sixties. About Heavy Petting. Counting the Bases. *Well, I got to first base. Hey, man, last week I got to second!* And then about the hippie era and Free Love. Which of course went all to hell by first turning into Free Sex and then finally to not a whole lot of sex at all after AIDS raised its ugly little head. Which is basically where these poor kids are stuck with

now.

But we're accenting the old days, the good things.

Who was your first love? Charlie asks me.

I think about it a minute. I'd have to say it was my babysitter, I tell him.

You're kidding me, he says. *Me too!*

I don't remember now who Charlie's babysitter was but mine was Linda Morrison, only four years older than me. And it turns out he's had a similar experience. They both *tormented* us. Broke our hearts by simply being older than us. Thus unattainable. That awful three-or-four year cavernous gap in ages.

You remember that song? I ask him.

Sure I do, he says. BORN TOO LATE. It was my favorite!

Same here!

We sing a few bars. We're laughing like hell now. The kids too.

What was their name? That Fifties Girl-Group? Damned if I can remember, he says.

Me neither. They were a one-hit wonder I think.

Damn! *Tip of my tongue.*

We sing a few more bars. Finally Charlie finishes his beer and declares he's pretty much had it for the night, he's gonna go hit the sack. Probably a good idea. But I'm not finished with my scotch yet.

He's all the way across the quad and almost to his door when I get it.

The PONI-TAILS! I yell.

Charlie turns. Throws his arms open wide to the stars. And commences to trot

back across the quad to me so I throw my arms up too and then we're trotting toward one another like that pair of slo-mo lovers in the old Breck Shampoo commercial, singing at the top of our lungs.

Born too late

For you to notice me

To you, I'm just a kid

That you won't date

Why was I born too late?

We meet, embrace, and sing out the whole damn thing in each other's arms. Every verse. I even try some harmony. Lights are going on the dorm rooms. NECON campers staring out the windows. *Somebody crazy out there! What the hell?*

Oh, it's just Charlie and Dallas.

Our group of newbies are rolling. We finish the song and Charlie grabs me by the back of the head and kisses me on the cheek.

'Night Dallas.

"Night Charlie.

And we're buddies. For life.

-- August, 2007

Begin to find Charles Grant at Smashwords

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/CharlesLGrant>



JACK
KETCHUM

PEACEABLE KINGDOM
AN AFTERWORD

AFTERWORD

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People will often ask a writer, where do your ideas come from? The answer for me is just about anywhere. Everything from a nosebleed to a love affair to a TV ad can trip the wire to a story. But some come unbidden, from

deep memory. And memory like writing can be an odd and mysterious thing.

It's well over a year since I wrote the introduction to this book and over five years since I wrote the final story but I just a few nights ago had a kind of, well...what the hell, *call it an epiphany*.

I was watching a good, highly annoying documentary on PBS about Elvis' gospel music -- good because the documentary was good, annoying because it was one of those godawful pledge weeks where every twenty minutes they interrupt for *ten* minutes and the damn thing

just goes on and on. I'd give them a hundred right now not to *have* pledge weeks.

Anyway. The film spent a good deal of time on the first gospel EP, released in 1957. I'd been a boy of only eleven when I first heard it and one song in particular has remained one of my

favorites ever since. For my
money it's as good as
LAWDY MISS CLAWDY or
MONEY HONEY and a
billion times better than, say,
HOUND DOG.

But you know how it is
sometimes that when you
know the lyrics to a song as
well as you know your

mother's maiden name you
somehow stop actually
hearing them for awhile?

Well, listening to this one
again on this fine and tedious
special I *did* hear them for a
change and thought, my god,
that's where it all came from.

The song was Thomas
A. Dorsey's haunting, bluesy

PEACE IN THE VALLEY,
written in Georgia in 1936.

The lyrics go like this...

*Well the bear will be
gentle*

*And the wolves will be
tame*

*And the lion shall lay
down by the lamb*

And the beasts from the

wild

Shall be led by a child

And I'll be changed

Changed from this

creature that I am

By now you've
presumably read
FIREDANCE. Sound
familiar?

When I was working

the story it certainly wasn't
the song I was thinking of --
it was that Alan M. Clark's
painting, on which I was
basing it, reminded me so
much thematically of a darker
version of the nineteenth-
century *naifs*' "Peacable
Kingdoms" I'd first seen
easily twenty-five years

before. Because I'd enjoyed them so much at the time I'd searched out the passage in Isaiah. And then enjoyed the passage so much because it had clearly inspired PEACE IN THE VALLEY, something I'd never known before.

Then I proceeded to

forget all about it.

But I have to think now
that going back in time
through the twists and turns
of mind, the title of the book
you are holding derives from
a story written about a
painting, then a school of
paintings viewed many years
before, inspired by a passage

in the bible and finally to a
blues and gospel lyric which
captured the imagination of
an eleven-year-old suburban
kid who loved his Elvis early
on.

So here's the epiphany.

Do the math.

I'm fifty-six.

And I think that I've

been waiting for, gradually coming to and then writing down the title of, this book for forty-five years. If that's true, could be that child is still in here somewhere leading on the beasts in me.

-- Jack Ketchum, 2003



JACK KETCHUM

PEACEABLE KINGDOM
AN INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION to PEACEABLE KINGDOM

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I don't know why you
put up with me.

It's a matter of
consistency. Or in my case,
inconsistency.

As a writer I'm all over
the place.

Take the books.

Suppose you came to my stuff through OFF SEASON way back when and you kinda liked its violent streak and its extreme stance so you're looking for more of the same. You have to wait a while -- four whole years -- and then when you finally do

find a new Ketchum title on the racks what do you get? HIDE AND SEEK. A quiet little first-person suspense story, a *love* story no less with, yeah, some nasty low-ball curves thrown at you at the end but compared the first book, practically good-natured.

Or here's another scenario. Suppose the first book of mine you read is HIDE AND SEEK, and you miss COVER completely -- hell, almost everybody did -- and the next thing you find is THE GIRL NEXT DOOR. Now I'm going to do a *lot* of supposing here and assume

that you ignore the ditsy
skullheaded cheerleader on
the cover, you assume it's *not*
Ketchum doing an R.L. Stine
ripoff and actually buy the
thing and sit down to read it
and at first it's another quiet
little first-person memoir-
type novel so you're
comfortable with that from

having read HIDE AND
SEEK, so you get a little into
it and then a little more into it
and finally you say...

...what the hell *is* this
shit! Has he gone totally out
of his fucking *mind*?

Then maybe your first
Ketchum book's SHE
WAKES. Ancient Greek

gods and goddesses, zombies
and cats and snakes all
chasing one another all over
the Aegean. Then you pick
up RED.

*Hmmm. That's
interesting.*

*This one seems to be
about an old guy and his dog.*

Has he gone totally out

of his fucking *mind*?

You get the point.

Still, should you need any further proof of my inconsistency, that's what this volume is about -- to rid you of any notion other than that once and for all. And I welcome it wholeheartedly. The short-fiction form is

where a writer gets to move around most anyway. Unlike a novel you don't have to live with an idea or a set of ideas for six months or a year, so as long as you obey whatever idea you do have you can zig and zag to your heart's delight. Experiment. Float like a butterfly, sting like a

bee. Get in, get out, go on to something else.

So there's stuff in here like TO SUIT THE CRIME that's as ice-cold heartless as anything I've ever done and stuff like FIREDANCE which is almost cuddly. Surreal stories like THE HOLDING CELL and

CHAIN LETTER and the odd
black comedy like THE
HAUNT or THE BUSINESS.
You even get my one and
only vampire story in THE
TURNING and an honest-to-
god UFO yarn in AMID THE
WALKING WOUNDED.

There's even a
Western.

As I say, I'm all over the place. And I think that I've been very fortunate in that most of my readers seem to expect that of me by now and apparently have no real urge to pin me down. Peter Straub once paid me the compliment of saying that he thought a lot of people came

to my writing for the wrong reasons but stuck with me for the right ones. I suspect there's some truth in that.

But there's also the fact that in my experience most of my readers are first and foremost plain old-fashioned *readers*. *Good* readers.

They're not looking for cozy

brand-name output and that means I don't have to give it to 'em. They're not lazy and have little patience with pre-fab beach-bag books or Oprah's opine de jour. They're questers.

They know that every now and then you're gonna get lucky and pure gold like

King and Straub's BLACK HOUSE will simply drop into your lap at the local supermarket but after that, if your bent is horror and suspense fiction, you're gonna have to get your hands dirty and root around for more. Find a Ramsey Campbell or an Edward Lee.

They *expect* diversity and search it out. They want what all good readers want -- to be taken somewhere in a book or a story that's really worth visiting for a while. Maybe even worth thinking about after.

If that place happens to scare the shit out of you all

the better.

Some of the stories collected here try to do exactly that and some don't. Sure, they all tend to proceed from some dark place -- it's me after all -- but sometimes they've got something else on their mind too. And that's one of the reasons this book

is called PEACEABLE
KINGDOM.

I wasn't just being
ironic, honest.

The title comes from
the final story in the book,
FIREDANCE.

Yep, the *almost cuddly*
one. Keep in mind I that said
almost.

For those of you who might be a little rusty on your Old Testament or art history the phrase derives from a passage in Isaiah 11:6-9, which a number of nineteenth-century *naïf* painters favored, often rendering the scene beautifully and using

Peaceable Kingdom as the title for their works. I reference the paintings in my story. But here's an excerpt from the biblical passage.

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling

*together; and a little child
shall lead them... and they
shall not hurt or destroy on
all my holy mountain...*

Wolf and lamb.

Leopard and goat-kid. Calf
and lion, little piggy and little
child.

Diversity, union,
harmony. Hopes I have for

this collection.

With the predators
among them all defanged for
good.

And that, finally, is my
wish for us all, concealed or
obvious somewhere in each
of these stories -- *they shall
not hurt or destroy.*

Not on my damn

mountain.

-- Jack Ketchum

December, 2001

She
Wakes

Jack Ketchum

An Afterword

The ultimate huntress.
Humans are her prey...

AFTERWORD to SHE WAKES

©2004 Dallas Mayr.

SHE WAKES had a rough time getting out of bed.

Written between 1983 and '84 on my trusty IBM Selectric typer, it was my fourth novel and my first crack at the supernatural. I

did not have a wonderful
batting average at the
moment. OFF SEASON had
sold well despite its
publishers' attempts to
disown it. But LADIES'
NIGHT hadn't sold at all and
HIDE AND SEEK had been
flushed down the 40,000-
copy-print-run toilet.

I was looking, I think,
for a Stephen King book.

It didn't happen. SHE
WAKES would sink my
batting average to an even
500 and damn near empty my
bank account.

I had been to Greece
twice by then for a total of

about five months and had actually felt the immense lingering power of places like Mykene and Delos. In fact with the exception of the psychic “summons,” the experiences Chase has in the Treasury of Atraeus were very nearly my own. I’d had other experiences, equally

powerful, which in order to keep the story rolling I had to leave out. But the point is I'd had the *feeling* of the place in spades.

I'd also felt the easy, languorous siren-song of the islands, which so much appeals to Dodgson.

The first time I

travelled there I expected to stay in Greece a month.

I stayed four.

And had the money not run out could easily have made it longer.

It was that mix of the intensely spiritual and purely physical that made me think that Greece would be a

perfect place to set a supernatural novel. To date I hadn't seen it done since THE ODYSSEY. I could slip in all the good old sex and violence and still point to something bigger -- something which, for me, was actually there.

In the six years that

elapsed between the time I first flew over in '77 to my second trip '83 the country had changed -- and not for the better. The tourists were still flocking there but they weren't spending money the way the used to. Things *did* always seem to need a paint-job. The old ways *were*

slipping. The mopeds *were* roaring. Terrorists *did* walk into the Athens airport and start blasting away. Greece was trying to find her way toward the ass-end of the twentieth century and, to my way of thinking, making a mess of it. And that's what gave me my theme.

Regeneration, renewal. A kind of prayer for a country I had come to love.

I'd done my homework previous to the first trip so I knew about the tripartite figure of Selene/Artemis/Hecate. I'd also met and had a brief affair with a very strange bigger-

than-life Irish girl my first time in Matala. I'd written about her in a story called THE LIAR, published years before in *Swank Magazine*. So I also had my villainess. I figured I was off and running.

The original title for the book was going to be THE

HUNTRESS and it took me
about eight months to write it.

And another four *years*
to sell it.

My agent tried, god
knows. Sent it out to
hardcover houses and
softcover houses, big houses
and little houses.

Nobody bit.

The rejection letters told the story. First, my timing was rotten. The bottom had just dropped out of the market for supernatural fiction as it does periodically and unless you were King or Straub or Saul or Koontz, forget it. Then, it seems I'd made a bad mistake with one

of my characters. Those of you who've read the Berkley edition as well as this one have probably noticed that in this new version Eduardo is gay. Well, this new version is also a *restored* version. Because that's who he was originally. The guy I modeled him on was, so I

figured why not? *But a gay man as a secondary lead in a supernatural thriller?*

What are you, nuts?

Women read this stuff.

So for the last couple of submissions I finally gave in to the pressure. I rewrote him, sorry to say. The real Eduardo is dead now, hit by a

car in Athens and never did
get to see what I'd done to
him. I apologize anyway.

But *anything* to get the
book out there. Anything.

Didn't work. No go.

500 ain't shabby for a
batter but it sure is for a
novelist.

First LADIES' NIGHT

and now this.

I was depressed as all hell.

More so when I read T.E.D Klein's wonderful book THE CEREMONIES -- which came out in '84, and had a pretty similar ending.

I wrote to Robert Bloch, who had been my

friend, confidant, personal
wiseman and mentor since I
was a teenage kid and told
him so. He told me not to
worry -- hell, it had happened
to him -- that what I should
do is put it in a cardboard box
in the closet and pull it out
again in a couple of years or
so when the market tips

upward again.

As in most things Bob chose to speak on he was right.

I went on and wrote COVER, which sold, thank god. To Warner Books.

Then my mother fell very ill and died in January of

‘87 and between that and some tumult of a male-female nature, for a while there I didn’t have a whole lot of heart for writing. But ya gotta eat and ya gotta slog along. So I pulled out THE HUNTRESS and tinkered with it some more, cutting the long slow monologue of

Chase's just before the shit hits the fan, among other things -- which eventually became the story WINTER CHILD -- and put it away again when I got the idea for THE GIRL NEXT DOOR.

Warner Books
promised much. They
promised *hardcover* even.

But when they dropped the ball on COVER and then drove it twelve feet into the ground on THE GIRL NEXT DOOR my agent and I went shopping and what we shopped was THE HUNTRESS. The market had turned again, just as Bob said it would. Berkley picked

it up and gave me my first really good cover-art ever. Even if they did want to change the book's name to something scarier. What the hell. I came up with a new one.

Finally in 1989, SHE WAKES opened her eyes to the world.

Even if the world didn't
exactly open *its* eyes to her.

Like HIDE AND
SEEK, COVER, and THE
GIRL NEXT DOOR before
her, my Greek book sank
without a trace.

Well, maybe a *ripple* of
a trace. Because you're

reading this, aren't you.

SHE WAKES was my fourth book written and my fifth book published. I was only into my fourth year as a novelist and it shows. There are some *awful* lines in this book and for the most part I've left them that way, the

same warts-and-all approach I took to the rewrite of LADIES' NIGHT. But I'd always *wanted* to do a rewrite on this one -- the only book I really did want to rewrite almost from the beginning -- largely because I was never satisfied with what I considered the flat, pat

feeling to the epilogue.

When Rich Chizmar gave me the chance and the check I jumped at it.

I went back to Greece for a month in April this year for the first time in *sixteen* years and took the book along with me. While I was there I realized that for one thing, I'd

gotten some facts wrong in the original. *That's Dionysos riding the panther, dummy, not Apollo. And he's riding a panther, not a goddamn lion.*

That sort of thing. So I've changed them. I also added and subtracted a line here and there. I don't let editors punctuate me the way I used

to so I've removed all those pesky colons and semicolons.

But most importantly, *I found out what was wrong with the ending.*

Why it bothered me so.

I found out as soon as I got there.

Because the first *day* I got there I climbed the hill to

the Acropolis and there was the Parthenon on that glorious bright spring day and I said to myself, you nitwit! *You set a whole damn book in Greece, in this wonderful country, and then in the very last chapter you move the thing to Paris? Huh? Paris? What was wrong with you? What were*

you *thinking*?

There's no
regeneration in *Paris*.

Maybe for somebody there is
I guess though I can't think
who at the moment but not
for you at least.

The regeneration for
you is *here*, standing right on
this mountain.

After sixteen years.

Bathed in ancient light.

So that was how I wrote
it.

--Jack Ketchum,

August, 2001



**BROKEN
ON THE
WHEEL
OF SEX**

An Introduction to
the Jerzey Livingston Years

JACK KETCHUM

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INTRODUCTION: THE GOBLIN ON THE DANCE FLOOR

I'm sticking my neck
out with this one, I know.
Way out.

And I figure it only

remains to be seen who
amongst you will come
bearing the headsman's
ax.

Or axes. Knives and
scythes and swords.

Anything with which
to chop or hack.

I won't exactly blame
you.

Jack Ketch, after all,
was British slang for
executioner. And the
worm doth turn.

On the other hand
some of you might just be
perverse enough and
forgiving enough to enjoy
these early yarns.

I offer them up in

either case.

They all were
written during the years
1976 to 1981 while I was
mostly doing other things.
Record reviews, shorts
and non-fiction of all
kinds. Serious to half-
serious to ridiculous,

selling to every market I
could scare up, from The
Miniature Collector to
Penthouse, from Parade to
Creem to Classic
Decorating and Home
Crafts. I mean, I'd go
anywhere. Just pay me
and watch that IBM
Selectric fly.

All the fiction,
though, sold to low-to-
mid-level-paying men's
mags, Swank Magazine in
particular but also to
Genesis, High Society,
Cavalier, Stag and
Nugget. Many were
reprinted several times,
mostly by Stag, climbing

down the ladder of
decency and good taste
until at utter nadir one of
them actually reached
Knave.

No kidding.

Am I proud of this?
Absolutely. And I thank
the editors of all these
magazines for giving me

the opportunity to learn about writing fiction while paying me in the one-hundred-fifty to three-hundred-fifty dollar-range for each of the stories.

There are a lot of folks only starting out in writing today who would probably kill for such a

trip down that ladder and they'd be absolutely right to feel that way.

I've called these the Jerzy Livingston years because over half of them were written under that name and the rest under my real one. Somehow

Jerzy seems more appropriate for this collection. My adoption of that particular pseudonym was both a joke -- a play on words -- and a nod to a very good writer, which I hoped someday to be. I had grown up in Livingston,

New Jersey, a small
suburban town across the
Hudson River. My mom
still lived there. As a
college kid I'd been
impressed with Kosinski's
BEING THERE and THE
PAINTED BIRD.

Ergo, Jerzy
Livingston.

I was thirty years old
at the time I put his name
to the manuscript of THE
HANG-UP, written at the
insistence of my girlfriend
that if I was such an all-
fired hotshit writer I
should get off my high-
falutin' artsy ass and
prove it and just sell

something for chrissake
and in fact the story I
wrote in response to that
dare was to be my first
pro-fiction-sale. To a
men's magazine. A stroke
magazine. Swank
Magazine to be exact and
I was delighted as hell to
have it.

But not exactly sure
how my relatives and my
parents' friends were
going to react to all that
Wide-Open-Beaver.

So I hid from the
town I'd grown up in
behind the name of the
town I'd grown up in. It
struck me as a neat idea

so Jerzy became my nom
de porn for awhile.

I'd been working
like a dog in a sweatshop
hell of a literary agency
for three long years but
I'd quit that finally and set
myself free to play again.
I had unemployment

checks and the occasional magazine money to support me. The places in which I chose to play very often had long rows of bottles of amber liquid to soothe me and alter my concept of what was possible in certain matters of friendship,

courtship and seduction.

Some of these
bottles would betray me.
Some of these goddamn
bottles would depress me
or make me stupid. Or
even cause me upon
occasion to worship at the
foot of some cold white
god in the open mouth of

whom someone had
recently shat.

I understood this and
accepted it. Because
most of these bottles I felt
to be my friends. They
held within them the
power to loosen the
tongue and lighten my
load and the loads of

others, male and female,
they made for
companionship, laughter,
dancing, for amiable
languorous talks till dawn
and sometimes, when I
got lucky, releasing
other, warmer loads into
soft wet pockets of
mystery.

I was callow. I was shallow. I was going to hell in a handcart.

It was A-Okay with me.

I had plenty of company.

My friend Nick Tosches had written an

article a few year back
which, as his agent in the
Job From Hell, I'd sold to
Penthouse. It was called
**BROKEN ON THE WHEEL
OF SEX** and postulated,
humorously though in all
seriousness, not really
screwing around at all
when you got right down

to it, that the sexual
revolution of the sixties
was already over.

And that everybody
had lost.

It was a notion that
informed pretty much all
my own fiction at the time.

The year was '76.

Go back there.

Disco and Punk,
Country Music and soon,
dead Elvis.

Donna Summer has
not yet found her way to
Jesus. She's still a Bad
Girl Sad Girl plying her
trade in the throbbing

Heart of Disco. Sid
Vicious is still Just That.
The British have invaded
once again and the
Ramones and Patti Smith
have fired back. There is
still a Shah on the throne
of Iran. Jim Jones in Ray-
Bans and tropical shirt is
only a few months away

from making Kool-Aid the preferred beverage of the Walking Dead.

On-Premises Sex-Clubs attract Manhattan celebrities and wife-swapping newlyweds from Mamaroneck. Titty bars. Nude lap dancing. Reflecting globes and

polyester three-piece suits. Snorts of coke and legal store-bought poppers. Drinks are still three or four bucks each in the clubs. A two-hour train-and-ferry ride from New York City to Fire Island and it is still possible to climb in the

sack with practically
anybody, any stranger
who looks remotely
fuckable, without
attracting a certain nasty
strain of virus.

Which would change
all this inevitably and
forever.

Nick was right. It

was over and nobody
knew.

In the meantime, we
played it.

In the sixties it was
Free Love.

The accompanying
head-music of the time
was dope and acid,

mescaline and
mushrooms.

In the seventies it
was Fucking.

By then the tune had
changed to coke and
amys, quaaludes and
speed.

And all those rows of
bottles.

The demise of
worry-free sex began
long before AIDS raised
its miserable head and
started actually killing off
the participants. Of
course it did, and a lot of
us in our heart of hearts
knew it even then. To
blame AIDS for all that

followed is revisionist
bullshit. Sex was already
in decay, friends. It had
gone from sacrament to
scorecard all in just a few
years. AIDS just corked
the genie in the bottle for
good.

Still the period had
its charms.

All truly decadent periods seem to. If you are going to hell in a handcart then somebody is carrying you. Which means you don't have to expend a whole lot of personal effort. You can cruise and float.

Which we did.

But it had its dark
side too.

You saw it in the
passed-out girls on the
dance floor. You saw it in
the rush to the john for
one more snort of coke.
Which usually you could
ill afford.

It was dark all right.

And I created my own
Dark Hero to dwell there.

In a decade when
Girl Next Door Nude
Photo Contests abounded,
when books and men's
mags and women's mags
and even some of the
straight mags were
promising you the stars,

sexually speaking -- if that
old fat fuck Al Goldstein
could get that much
nookie, so can I -- singing
the praises of
Recreational Sex and the
zipless fuck, giving you
instructions on how to
hold the perfect swing-
party or give the perfect

blowjob, I pulled some guy up out of my twisted psyche who scored but almost never did, both at the same time.

His name was Stroup. No first name, just Stroup.

That was another

play on words. Stroup
was Proust sounded out
phonetically and
scrambled. Arguably the
most sensitive writer in
history I turned into a
schmuck of almost leaden
sensibilities. It was
Stroup's lot in life to
understand practically

nobody, least of all
himself and certainly not
women, yet to pursue
both women and his own
satisfaction with dogged
determination.

Without having a
clue as to what might
actually bring him either
one.

A boozier. A loser.
A homophobe. A highly
questionable friend and
unreliable lover.
Misogynist as hell and for
the most part proud of it.

That was my guy.

In the bars back then
you met him all the time.

The true poet of this

kind of thing was Charles Bukowski and I confess to aping him shamelessly. But Bukowski's milieu was not my own god knows, neither L.A. nor Post Offices nor dens of serious passed-out alcoholic weirdness and his sheer ferocity was not

mine either. Stroup is pretty much a middle-class nobody trying to get over with his own line of bullshit, writing ad copy by day, carousing at night, usually living with a woman whose name is Carla or Shiela and always cheating on her.

Cheating almost as a
code of honor. Always
looking for more.

A quester, a man
with a mission.

An asshole.

For a while I kinda
liked him.

I wrote seven stories

featuring Stroup, some in the first person and some in the third and sold six of them. When I started marketing the seventh my editor at Swank, Ben Pesta, asked to see a story that was not about this jerk, "unless Stroup is some goblin whose

exorcism is really vital to your psychic well-being."

Direct quote. I still have the letter.

I didn't know if he was or he wasn't. But unlike Stroup I could take a hint. I shelved him and went on to other stuff. The seventh story's being

printed here for the first time and I'll direct you to my comments which follow the piece as to why.

In the tiny village of Fodele on the island of Crete I wrote three of the others appearing here, wrote them sitting on a

terrace eating mezes and
drinking retsina, typing
on a little toy typewriter
I'd rented for an
exorbitant price in
Heraklion because it was
the only one I could find
with an English-language
keyboard. If they're
generally nicer than the

Stroup stories that's
Greece speaking. But the
sexual hustle of the
seventies is still in there.
All the others are set in
New York City. East Side,
West side, All Around the
Town.

Taken together

they're a fairly varied group.

But I can't help thinking that the essence of Stroup keeps cropping up from time to time. Not in all the stories but somewhere in most of them. I think of the revenge-fuck in THE

LIAR. All that cynical
deadbeat bar
conversation in EAST
SIDE STORY. Slade Rule
patting his brand-new
client's ass in DEAD HEAT
and his rampant
homophobia.

So that maybe Pesta
was right. And I really

did have a goblin to
exorcise at the time.

My heroes since
have been largely nicer, I
think.

What I do know for
sure is that there's a whole
lot of anger here lurking
beneath what is for the
most part dark comedy.

Re-reading all this stuff for the first time in years that much was instantly clear. So that I'm thinking now that maybe the goblin was the period itself and how it refracted in me.

Remembering that time only a few years before when for some of us Love

really was Free and
missing that. Whistling in
the graveyard of what it
had become.

We aging Hippies I
guess have a lot to answer
for.

Guys like Stroup
included.